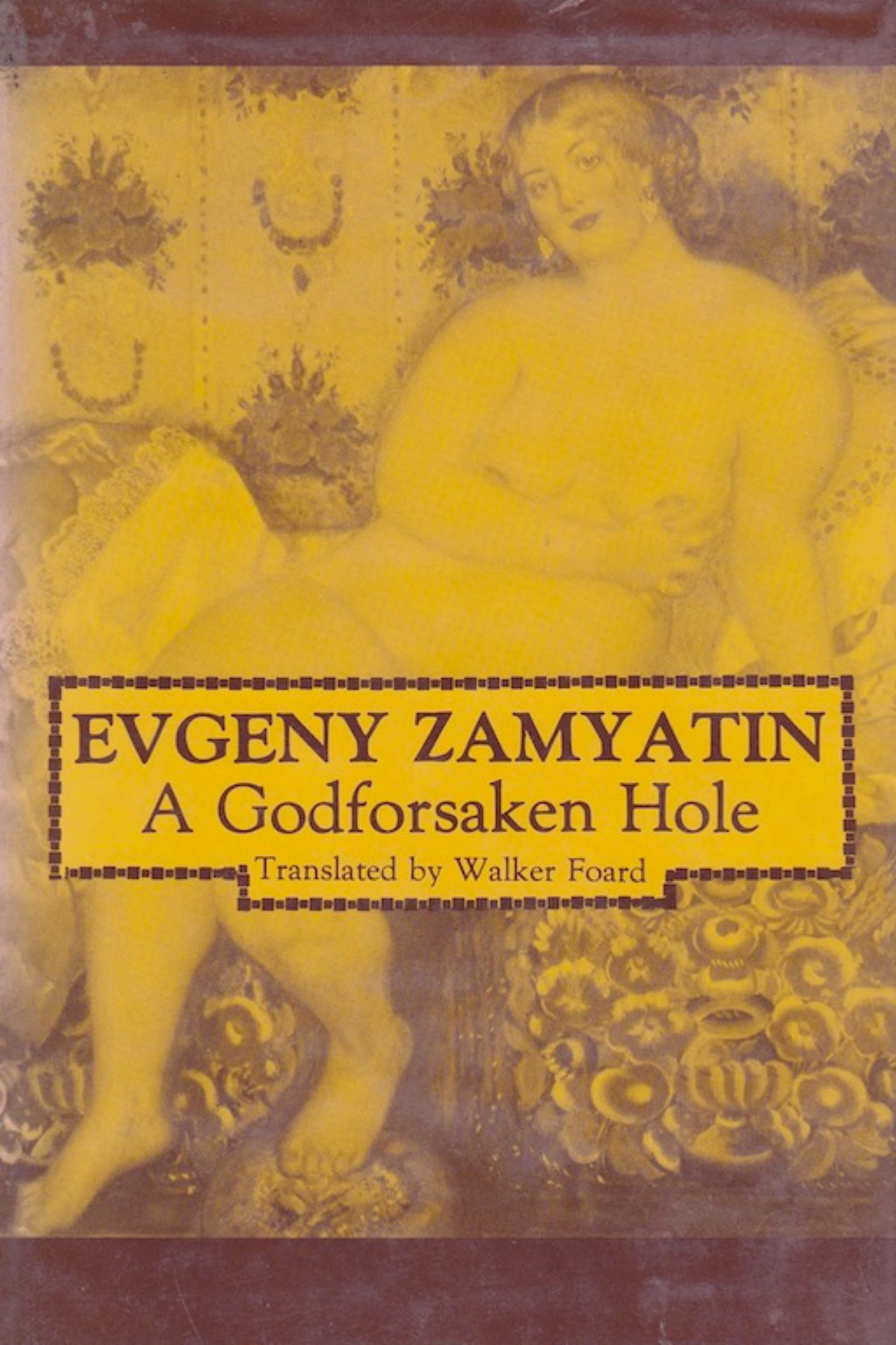

EVGENY ZAMYATIN

A Godforsaken Hole

Translated by Walker Foard

A Godforsaken Hole (1913-14) is a biting satire on life in a remote military garrison in Siberia. The cast includes a lewd and lecherous general, the local society's petty dictator; a wife whose nine children have nine fathers; Lieutenant Polovets, a latter-day "superfluous" hero unable to act on love or principle; and Captain Schmidt and his wife Marusya, whose strange, passionate sado-masochistic relationship accounts for much of this work's power. Soon after *A Godforsaken Hole* was published, the journal in which it was printed was confiscated because of Zamyatin's "insulting" portrait of the military and his "pornographic" expressions and details. Although *A Godforsaken Hole* is one of his early works, it contains the best of the mature Zamyatin: his wonderful expressionistic detail, love of erotic triangles, complex characterization and poetic structure.

Evgeny Zamyatin is known in the West as the author of *We,* the anti-Utopian novel which anticipated Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World.* Zamyatin was one of the most brilliant and innovative writers in Russia during the pre- and

post-Revolutionary years—an author of short stories, plays, novels and essays, a literary modernist, and a great advocate of creative freedom. His outspoken and revolutionary spirit brought him into conflict first with Tsarist censors and, not much later, with the Soviet authorities. When Zamyatin died in the 1930s in exile, his books were banned in the Soviet Union and he is still awaiting literary rehabilitation there.

"In *A Godforsaken Hole*, Zamyatin's special gift for satire is as striking as his art in isolating details, in which he was an apt pupil of Gogol. The story... is the model for all his later satires, in which the basic motif of being cut off from real life continually reappears."

Johannes Holthusen
Twentieth-Century Russian Literature.

EVGENY ZAMYATIN
A Godforsaken Hole

Translated by Walker Foard

Ardis, Ann Arbor

Evgeny Zamyatin, *A Godforsaken Hole*
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1. God's Yawn

Every man has something that sums him up all at once, something that sets him apart from a thousand others. And in Andrei Ivanych that something was — a forehead: the width and breadth of the steppe. Next to the forehead in question was a teeny nose — a pert Russian pug, accompanied by a flaxen mustache and infantry epaulets. When creating him, the good Lord had waved his hands and — presto: a forehead. But then the Lord yawned; boredom had set in, so he finished the job haphazardly, any old way, just to get it done. And so, ushered in by God's yawn, Andrei Ivanych went forth to live his life.

Last summer Andrei Ivanych came up with the idea of trying to get into an academy. Believe it or not, he spent seventy rubles just on books! He pored over the books all summer; then in August he happened to go to a concert by Hoffmann. God Almighty, what power! What was the sense of going to an academy: it was perfectly clear — Andrei Ivanych must become a Hoffmann. It was not without reason that everyone in the regiment said: the way Andrei Ivanych plays Chopin's Funeral March — just hearing it makes you cry!

Andrei Ivanych stashed all the academic books under the

couch, got himself a teacher and settled down to the piano: in the spring he would enter a conservatory.

But the teacher was blonde and she wore some sort of special perfume. So, she and Andrei Ivanych were extremely active all winter, but their activity had nothing to do with music. All thoughts of a conservatory went out the window.

So what now? Does Andrei Ivanych just go sour leading an officer's life in some Tambov or other? Not on your life! Someone else might have given up, but not Andrei Ivanych. The important thing was to start from scratch. To hell with the past, strike out for parts unknown. And then — find truest love, write a book of some kind, and conquer the whole world...

That is how Andrei Ivanych came to serve in parts unknown, in a godforsaken hole. Now he lies on the couch and curses. Come on now, really: his third day there, and the third day that fog has kept him from breathing easy. Yes, and this is the kind of fog it was: it made you lose your bearings, filled your head with a thick, shaggy murk, like an intoxicating drowsiness. An absurd sort of desolation set in and the prospect of sleep was frightening, unthinkable: the desolation began to spin.

Needed was a human voice — anyone's at all — to overcome the delirium. Andrei Ivanych called for his orderly.

"Hey, Neprotoshnov, come here a minute!"

The orderly raced in like a madman and stopped in his tracks at the door.

"Aren't you bored, Neprotoshnov, with this fog and all?"

"I-I can't say, yer honor..."

("Oh my God, look at those fish eyes. But there must be some way to get him...")

"Now let's see, Neprotoshnov, another year and you'll be home, right?"

"Egsickly so, yer honor."

"Have you got a wife?"

"Egsickly so, yer honor."

"You must miss her then? You do miss her, don't you?"

"Seein' as how this wife of mine is the pain of my existence, I..." and Neprotoshnov died out, suddenly remembered something, and drew himself up straighter.

"Go on, did you stop loving her, or what? Well?"

"I can't s-say, yer honor..."

("To hell with it. So he was probably the number one accordion player in his village and now — fish eyes. No, I'll have to get rid of him.")

"All right, go on home, Neprotoshnov."

Andrei Ivanych fell back on his pillow. Through the window crawled the fog, shaggy and wadded; it was simply impossible to breathe.

Andrei Ivanych pulled himself together and, although he snored, he could at least breathe. And hearing the sound of his own snores, he felt like jumping up: "What in heaven's name is wrong with me — here it is the middle of the day and I'm sleeping!"

But the fog had snared him in its web, and there was no way he could budge even an arm or a leg.

2. A Raphael of the Potato

"His excellency the commandant is not at home."

"Take a good look, old boy. Say that it's Lieutenant Polovets. Polovets, Andrei Ivanych."

"Polovets?"

What the general's orderly had was not a face, but a shiny

copper samovar: every bit as round, every bit as polished. And what had been just a lifeless samovar suddenly began to bubble and boil:

"Polove-ets? For heaven's sake, I forgot, he is at home. Polovets — well, how do you like that? He is home, after all! He's just a little bit busy."

The orderly opened the vestibule door to the left. Andrei Ivanych bent down and walked in. ("Hmmm... could I have come to the wrong place?")

Pandemonium, smoke, commotion, the sound of something hissing, the smell of fried onions...

"Who's there? Come a little closer, a little closer, I can't he-ar!"

Andrei Ivanych stepped a little closer:

"I have the honor of reporting for duty to your excellency..."

What the hell: is this really he, the general? A cook's apron and a pregnant belly, propped up on two stubby legs. A bald, goggle-eyed, frog-like head. And he was completely squat, funnel- shaped, distended — a huge frog — and the belly concealed by his clothes might well be covered with green and white spots.

"Reporting for duty? Hmmm, a good thing, a good thing... I've got very few officers. No shortage of drunkards, though," the general growled.

And once again he got down to the business at hand: chopping up a grainy white potato into wondrously thin slices. He finished slicing it, wiped his hands on the apron, leaped sideways toward Andrei Ivanych, stared intently, glanced around attentively, and shouted angrily from the depth of his being, like a watersprite from a tarn.

"Well, what ill wind blew you here? Been reading too much Mayne Reid, eh? You, my dear friend, could be sitting in Russia, under your mother's skirts, where you'd be bet-

ter off. Well, speak up! If you get into trouble here, I'm the one who's going to have to straighten it out!"

Andrei Ivanych actually lost his nerve: the general had flared up mighty fast.

"Your excellency, I... In Tambov I... But here, I think, there's the sea... Chinese are here..."

"Here! They're on their way here, all right; they think this place is for them..."

But the general didn't finish: something on the stove began hissing furiously; steam began to swirl around; there was the smell of something burning. Quick as a flash, the general leaped to the spot and, with a torrent of pungent curses, began walloping and pummeling a shadowy figure.

Only then did Andrei Ivanych spot the Chinese cook wearing a blue jacket. He stood in front of the general like some kind of timid young animal on its hind paws.

"Take that!" — the cook had been dealt a resounding slap.

But he did nothing. He just wiped his squinting eyes with his fists, so strangely, so quickly, like a rabbit.

The general was panting; underneath the apron his belly rippled.

"Ugh! They've driven me to the brink! They're impossible, they haven't got an ounce of sense. Just turn your back on them and this is what they throw together... It kills me when dinner is so harum-scarum, botched up, without any feeling whatsoever. Food is a precious gift from God. Let's see, how is it they used to teach us: we don't eat to live, but live to... Or how is it now?"

Andrei Ivanych stared silently with his eyes wide open. The general took a napkin and then ever so lovingly, carefully, patted the thin slices of potato dry.

"Just look at this potato. Do you think I just dumped it in the frying pan and fried it up any old way? You see... And

any man with God-given talent understands that butter is out of the question... Come now, butter? God forbid! In *friture* — absolutely, without fail! Remember that! Write it down, my boy, once and for all: in *friture* do you hear?"

The general took a lemon and squeezed it over the potato slices. Growing bolder, Andrei Ivanych asked:

"But why the lemon, your excellency?"

Apparently, such ignorance cut the general to the quick. He recoiled and shouted from the depths of his being — from the bottom of a tarn:

"What do you mean 'why?' Without it all you get is rubbish, profanation! But smoke them, dry them through and through, and brown them in *friture*... Potatoes *à la lyonnaise* — you've heard of it? Well, what would you know about it! A treasure, a pearl, a Raphael! And what's it made of? Simple potatoes and leftovers. What we're talking about, my dear friend, is art, creativity and..."

("Potatoes, Raphael, what nonsense! Is this a joke?") — Andrei Ivanych looked over at him.

No, it was no joke. Even as he watched, something human, distant, under the ashen face flickered and went out.

("All right, then, let him have his potatoes, this Raphael of the potato.")

"Larka, show him in to my wife. Goodby, my good fellow, goodby."

In a forest one often comes across clearings — places where lumber has been cut. Three good-for-nothing trees remain and they only make everything worse, emptier. Such was the general's parlor: here and there stood a chair, like a cataract; and on the wall hung the regimental group. In the middle of the room stood a Viennese loveseat and there, looking somehow out of place and serving no apparent purpose, perched the general's wife.

Sitting with the general's wife was a Captain Nechesa. Andrei Ivanych already knew Nechesa: he remembered from the day before the unkempt beard, lavishly speckled with crumbs. Andrei Ivanych approached the general's wife and kissed her outstretched hand.

The general's wife transferred a glass filled with something red from her left hand back into her right, and staring into space, she said to the lieutenant in a monotone:

"Sit down; it's been a long time since I've seen you."

("What is this 'long time since I've seen you' business?")

And right then and there, she drove Andrei Ivanych out of his wits. Every word of his pre-arranged speech flew out of his head.

Captain Nechesa, finishing some kind of conversation, barked out hoarsely:.

"So once again, permit me to ask you to become the godmother, I beg of you..."

The general's wife sipped her wine; she had a faraway look in her eyes; she hadn't heard. She spoke — out of the clear blue sky — about something else that was evidently on her mind.

"Lt. Molochko got some warts on his hands. And if only they had been confined to his hands. But now they're all over his body... They're terribly unpleasant, warts."

As she said the word "warts," something darted and sniffed behind Andrei Ivanych's back. He looked around and saw behind him, through the crack in the door, someone's eye and freckled nose.

Captain Nechesa repeated ingratiatingly:

"...I beg of you, be the godmother!"

This time the general's wife must have heard. She began to laugh bleakly, jaggedly. And she kept on laughing and laughing, completely unable to stop. Barely able to talk, she turned to Andrei Ivanych:

"The ninth... Captain Nechesa's wife has had her ninth. If I'm going to be the godmother, why don't you be the godfather?"

Captain Nechesa started to twist his beard:

"For God's sake, dear lady, I beg of you. There already is a godfather. My tenant, Lt. Tikhmen, he was promised long ago..."

But once again the general's wife had heard nothing; once again she stared into space, sipping from her glass...

Andrei Ivanych and Captain Nechesa left together. The damp ground squelched under their feet; the fog had settled on the roofs and was falling like melting snow onto their caps, their epaulets, and down their necks.

"What makes her so... strange?" asked Andrei Ivanych.

"The general's wife? My heavens, what a good old gal she used to be. After all, I've been here for twenty years and know everyone like the back of my hand. Well, the story goes like this: it's been seven years now — a long time! She had a baby — her first and last. It was born and then died. She turned inward then — and has been that way ever since. But every now and again she'll begin to talk about — you know, she'll blurt out... that thing about Molochko, about the warts. You don't know whether to laugh or cry!"

"I don't understand at all."

"Wait and see."

3. Petyashka Gets Christened

So all right. So the captain's wife gave birth to her ninth. So there was a christening, but what's so special about that? Yet the gentlemen officers could talk of nothing else.

What's the reason for this — boredom, lack of imagination or idleness? The truth of the matter is this: the army had gone and set up a post that was utterly useless; guns had been put in place and people had been herded to this godforsaken hole: now serve your time! And they do. Late at night, in a sleepless void, every rustle of a mouse, every crackle of a twig — grows, intensifies, fills every nook and cranny. So it is here: every trifle assumes awesome dimensions; the unbelievable becomes the believable.

Now take the case of Captain Nechesa's wife and her ninth baby — that's not such a simple matter: whose baby was it? Just try to figure it out! The captain's wife had a baby every year. And one baby was the spitting image of Ivanenko, another was to the aide-de-camp as two peas in a pod and a third was a duplicate of Lt. Molochko, complete with his pink, calf-like face... But whose is this ninth one?

And to make matters worse, Molochko took it upon himself to find out. The reason is simple. The year before they had put him through the ritual of being godfather to the captain's wife's baby. They had all congratulated him, and then demanded that he furnish refreshments. Now he wanted to get even.

"For heaven's sake wait just one minute," Molochko jumped up like a baby goat, like a calf merrily snacking on milk from someone's finger. "Now gentlemen, there's Tikhmen; he's their tenant, after all... Is it really possible that the captain's wife didn't accommodate him? That just can't be! And if so, then..."

Br-ravo, even Molochko could be quick-witted at times, bravo!

So they decided on Tikhmen; maybe he was guilty in neither body nor spirit. Nevertheless, it was fun to amuse oneself at his expense since he was so serious and long-nosed and read, the devil take him, Schopenhauer, or

someone by the name of Kant.

And to catch Tikhmen unawares, to keep him from running away, Molochko was sent just half an hour before the christening to alert the captain's wife to the invasion of outsiders. In the local jargon, this was known as "wangling an invitation."

The captain's wife was lying in bed, small and completely round: a round little face, round quick eyes, and tiny round ringlets on her forehead — in fact, all her charms were round. The captain had just given his spouse a smack on the cheek and left. And the ringing of one of the glasses on the shelf, a result of the captain's footsteps, had not yet died down when in walked Lt. Molochko. And having said hello, he proceeded to smack the captain's wife on the very spot that the captain had chosen.

The captain's wife desperately hated this type of coincidence — there was something positively indecent about it. She angrily rolled back her round eyes:

"What brings you crawling here to kiss me, Molochishko? Can't you see I'm sick?"

"Well, all right, all right, what a priss you've become!"

Molochko planted himself next to the bed. ("How can I string Katyusha along so I don't have to wangle the invitation right away?")

"But you know," Molochko jumped up, "I've been over to the Schmidts'; they're always kissing each other, can you imagine? Their third year married — and still at it... I don't understand!"

Captain Nechesa's wife grew stronger, turned a shade of pink; her eyes opened.

"Never mind this Marusechka Schmidt! She fancies herself such a princess on a pea; she makes me sick... She doesn't want to have anything to do with anyone. You just

watch, God will punish her for her pride..."

They picked Marusya apart and threw away the pieces, and then there was nothing left to talk about. Apparently there was no way around it — the time had come. Molochko cleared his throat.

"You see, Katyusha...well, uh... Well, in a word, we're all getting set for the christening and we want to invite ourselves over. We have to honor Tikhmen as the godfather. I thought it up, can you imagine?"

Molochko had certainly not expected Katyushka to agree so readily. She burst out laughing roundly and began to thrash about her short legs kicking under the quilt; she even clutched her stomach: oh, too much!

"Why, what a sneak you are, Molochishko: Tikhmen as godfather? Our long-nosed Tikhmen! So it has to be him, but he's always got his nose in a book."

And so — the baby was christened. The general's wife, smiling and gazing into the distance, was off in another world. In a sleepy voice the garrison priest read from a prayer book. The whole back of his cassock was covered with lint.

And continually staring at those bits of lint was the godfather — Lt. Tikhmen. Tall, gaunt, looking ready to fall apart he stood transfixed, with the baby in his arms, twitching his long nose in astonishment.

("Oh my God, what have I let myself in for... What if this thing in my arms starts screaming? What do I do?")

But this "thing" in his arms turned out even worse: with horror Lt. Tikhmen felt a sudden wetness on his arms and from the warm bundle drops began falling on the floor. Right then and there, Tikhmen forgot all protocol. Recklessly, he shoved his godson into the arms of the general's wife and stepped back. God only knows where he would

have hightailed it to if the company, with Molochko at its head, hadn't been standing behind to put him back in his place.

The time had now come for the baby to be immersed in holy water. The sleepy priest turned to the general's wife in order to take the baby, but she wouldn't hand him over. She held him tight, not wanting to let go of him, and shouted:

"I won't let him go, I just won't let him go, I won't let him go; he's mine!"

The priest took fright and headed for the door. My heavens, what's going on? Everyone bustled about and whispered. Had it not been for Molochko, there might never have been a christening. Molochko walked up to the general's wife, took her firmly by the hand, and whispered:

"Let go, what's he to you? You'll have your own, just imagine. Since I've said it... Do you really doubt me? Me?"

The general's wife laughed blissfully and let him go. Well glory be, thank heavens. By the skin of their teeth they had christened the boy and named him Petyashka.

At this point all the gentlemen officers approached Lt. Tikhmen. All at once, on command, everyone bowed low:

"It's our privilege, Papa dear, to congratulate you on the birth of Petyashka. How about a token from your honor!"

Tikhmen flailed his arms like a windmill. "What do you mean 'Papa dear?' I want nothing to do with it; what kind of people are you? I won't stand for this..."

"But where children are concerned, old boy, God alone is master. You can stand it or not, but..."

They badgered him to tears. Nothing could be done: at the evening meeting Tikhmen stood as host. And it came about that from then on during drill they would ask him how his little son, Petyashka was getting along. And they used this very same Petyashka to thoroughly rattle and confuse Tikhmen.

4. Blueness

Does a man need much? The sun peeped out, the blasted fog burned off, and the whole world was suddenly dear to Andrei Ivanych. The company stood waiting for orders, but he was completely absorbed: the slightest movement would be terrible — it might shatter the crystal blue palace.

The ocean... First Tambov, and now the Pacific. Far below, at his feet, it puffed its sleepy blue smoke and crooned a dreamy, enchanting song. And the golden pillars of the sun that had lain peacefully on that blueness suddenly expanded and rose to support walls of an unbearably deep blue. And floating smoothly past into the blueness, into the depth below, was a Madonna web, a gossamer, and for a long time Andrei Ivanych followed it with his eyes. Someone behind him was shouting at a soldier:

"You call that close order drill, you bastard? Have you lost your tongue? Is it all in one ear and out the other?"

But Andrei Ivanych didn't react, didn't hear, didn't turn around, just kept sailing after the gossamer.

"Well now, are you thinking of Tambov? Or do you like it here — you're so absorbed."

That did it: Andrei Ivanych tore himself away and turned around. Looking at him with a grin was Schmidt — tall, much taller than Andrei Ivanych, and sturdy, a burden for the earth itself, you might say.

"Like it? That doesn't begin to say it, Captain Schmidt. You know, except for the Tsna River near Tambov, I hadn't seen anything — and all of a sudden... Don't you see, it's overwhelming. No, not even that exactly: it turns you to ashes and sweeps you off with the wind, well, just like... It's intoxicating."

"What's all this? W-well!" and once again the Schmidt

grin — possibly kind, and possibly not.

Andrei Ivanych took it as kind; the whole world was kind. And he surprised even himself by shaking Schmidt's hand gratefully.

Schmidt lost his grin and his face struck Andrei Ivanych as almost unpleasant; it was a rough kind of face, made from something too hard, impossible to smooth out the way it should be — it was just too hard. And then there was the chin...

But Schmidt was already smiling again:

"It seems you've gotten tired of your orderly. Nechesa was telling me."

"Yes, he's just too 'anything you say, sir'... I'd like to trade him for whoever's convenient, if only..."

"Where's the problem, then? Trade with me. My Guslyaikin, frankly speaking, is a drunk. But he's an extremely cheerful fellow."

"Thank you, thank you so much! I just don't know how I can ever..."

They said goodby. Andrei Ivanych walked home still completely full of the blueness. He would have preferred to walk home alone, carrying it carefully inside himself, but Molochko tagged along.

"What's new, what's new?" he held his pink, silly-eyed face up to Andrei Ivanych; he wanted to find out something new that would titillate the general's wife, and Katyusha, and everyone that evening at the Officers' Club.

"Nothing special," Andrei Ivanych said. "Schmidt offered me his orderly."

"Schmidt? You don't say! It's pretty rare for Schmidt to start a conversation. Just imagine! So you were at the Schmidts'? And at the commander's? But let's see, the commander's on leave. Now that's what I call luck — being

perpetually on leave, can you imagine?"

"I haven't made it to the Schmidts' yet," Andrei Ivanych said absentmindedly, still thinking of the dreamy blueness. "I've been at Nechesa's and the general's. The general's wife, for no reason at all, suddenly started on about warts..."

Andrei Ivanych suddenly remembered, but it was too late. Molochko flushed bright red, bridled, and said importantly:

"Please! I beg you... I'm proud of the fact, if I may say so, that I am honored with the trust of such a woman. Warts have absolutely nothing to do with it... Absolutely nothing!"

He began to pout and fell silent. Andrei Ivanych was glad.

Molochko stopped at a small, dilapidated wooden house. "Well goodby, I'm home."

But, having said goodby, he swung back once more and in a minute was able to tell about how the general was a ladies' man to end all ladies' men; he was able to point out the Schmidts' small green house and drop some hint about Marusya Schmidt; he was able to babble something incomprehensible about some sort of Lancepoop Club, something about Lt. Tikhmen's Petyashka...

Andrei Ivanych just barely managed to shake off all these matters. He did shake them off, however, and once again walked as if in a dream, spellbound. He floated through the blueness; there was no earth beneath his feet, and it was uncertain on what the fences, trees, and houses were standing. And it was surprising that the houses were the same as those in Tambov — with doors, chimneys, windows...

In one of the windows something flashed; someone had started knocking on the window, so rapidly, so cheerfully.

("Who me?") — Andrei Ivanych stopped in front of the small green house. ("No, not me.") — so he started to walk on.

Suddenly the window in the small green house sprang open; a cheerful voice called out:

"Hey, stranger — you there — come on over here!"

Bewildered, Andrei Ivanych approached and took off his cap. ("But what is this? Who is this person?")

"Listen here, why don't we get acquainted? After all, we'll have to get around to it sooner or later. I'm Marusya Schmidt, Have you heard of me? I was sitting by the window and thought: why not knock? Oh, what a wonderful forehead you have! My husband has talked about you..."

Mumbling something, Andrei Ivanych took in everything with his eyes: a narrow mischievous face — something like the face of a little mouse or a lovable wild goat. Long and narrow, somewhat slanting eyes.

"So you're shocked? This sort of thing isn't done? I don't care. I just love playing tricks! In boarding school I was on kitchen duty — I fried up a cutlet for the headmaster made out of crumpled paper... Ha ha ha, what a time that was! And Schmidt's portrait... Do you know Schmidt? What am I saying — he's even talked to me about you! You'll have to come over some evening. We'd have such a good visit!"

But Andrei Ivanych saw that she too had become silent and was looking somewhere past him. She frowned ever so slightly. At the corners of her mouth were traced unchildlike wrinkles; not wrinkles yet, but they would come in time.

"A gossamer!" She gazed at the golden Madonna web.

She moved her eyes to Andrei Ivanych and asked:

"Have you ever thought about death? No, I don't mean death exactly, but that one final second of life, delicate, like the gossamer. The very last second: suddenly it snaps, and

then all is quiet..."

For a long time they both sailed after the gossamer with their eyes. It flew away into the blueness; it had been — and now it was not.

Marusya burst out laughing. Maybe she was embarrassed by her sudden talk of death. She slammed the window and disappeared.

Andrei Ivanych went home. ("Everything is fine, everything is wonderful... And to hell with it, with Tambov. Let it dry up and blow away! Here everyone is kind. I must get to know them better... Everyone's kind. And the general... oh, well, never mind him...")

5. Through Guslyaikin

Andrei Ivanych was relieved to see the last of his "anything you say, sir" nincompoop, Neprotoshnov. Guslyaikin, whom he had acquired in the trade with Schmidt, did in fact prove to be as garrulous as an old woman and a drunk to boot. And, as luck would have it, he turned up with a battered face, lavishly adorned with pieces of black plaster (what Guslyaikin called it was "caster" from the word "cast": actually very simple). Yet such as he was — with his black patches and his love of the bottle — still, Andrei Ivanych found him easier to take than Neprotoshnov...

Guslyaikin evidently discerned the disposition of his new master and took him into his confidence — as a token of his gratitude. While living at the Schmidts', Guslyaikin, old woman that he was, must have spent his every waking moment at the keyholes and cracks in the door. Right off, he told something so dirty about the Schmidts' bedroom that Andrei Ivanych turned bright red and sternly cut him

short. Guslyaikin was dumbfounded: ("Good lord, any of the ladies around here, not to mention the gentlemen, would pay a pretty penny for such stories; they'd listen like I was a nightingale. But him... Most likely he's only faking.") — and he began again.

No matter how hard Andrei Ivanych tried to change the subject, no matter how much he protested, Guslyaikin stayed right on course, planting certain dark, passionate, fragmentary images in Andrei Ivanych's mind. First he sees Schmidt carrying Marusya in his arms like a child — that's right, in his arms — and during dinner he holds her, feeding her out of his hands... Then for some reason Schmidt puts Marusya down in the corner — she stands and is glad to be standing. Then they put some firewood in the stove; the two of them stoke the fire; in front of the stove is a bearskin rug...

And when Andrei Ivanych finally made his way to the Schmidts' and sat in their dining room with its cosy, rough-hewn, timbered walls, he was really afraid to raise his eyes: she might suddenly — Marusya might suddenly see from his eyes what thoughts... Ah, damn you, Guslyaikin!

But Schmidt spoke in his even, icy-clear voice:

"Hmmm... So you say you liked our Raphael of the potato? He's a sweetheart, all right! But they wouldn't have stuck the general in this godforsaken hole for doing good deeds. And now this: where is the soldiers' money disappearing to? Where's the fodder for the horses? I have a hunch, I have a hunch..."

Andrei Ivanych couldn't hold out any longer: with a curiosity repulsive even to himself, he raised his eyes. Schmidt was sitting on the couch; Marusya was standing behind him, under a palm. At that moment Marusya leaned over Schmidt and quietly, just once, ran her hand through his

coarse hair. Just once — but she did it so tenderly, so tenderly...

Andrei Ivanych's heart skipped a beat. ("But what has this to do with me?") Nothing whatsoever. Nevertheless, his heart ached even more intensely. ("If only it would ever happen to me — just once, just once...")

Andrei Ivanych came back to earth when Schmidt called his name.

"...In these parts Andrei Ivanych is one of a kind — an innocent lamb. And what a motley crew we have! Me? I'm here for assault and battery. Molochko — for public indecency. Nechesa — for dim-wittedness. Kosinsky — for cards. Look out, little lamb: you'll go to pot here, you'll turn into a drunk, you'll shoot yourself..."

Maybe it was because Marusya was standing under the palm, or maybe it was because of Schmidt's grin — but whatever the reason, it all became unbearable. Andrei Ivanych jumped up:.

"This is really too much! You've already said enough to keep me from taking to drink. And what business is it of yours, anyway?"

"What a prickly sort you are!" Marusya burst out laughing. "You're only joking, aren't you, Schmidt. Aren't you?"

Again she bent over Schmidt from behind the couch. ("If only she wouldn't stroke him... Don't do it, don't do it,") — pleaded Andrei Ivanych. He held his breath... She had evidently asked something or other — he answered out of the blue:

"No thank you..."

"What do you mean 'thank you'? I'm asking if you've been to the Nechesas'."

And only when Schmidt was leaving did Andrei Ivanych become Andrei Ivanych. No Guslyaikin around, no need to

fear that she would stroke Schmidt; everything was simple, tender, joyful.

With just the two of them, there was no need to think about what to say: everything spoke for itself. The words galloped and gamboled like a spring rain. Such a torrent that Andrei Ivanych would stop short, not finishing his sentences, yet it made no difference: she had to understand, she did understand, she heard the same... Or maybe it only seemed that way? Maybe Andrei Ivanych had merely invented this Marusya. Ah, never mind, if only...

Never to be forgotten — stowed away in a treasure chest — was one particular evening. Glorious warm weather — people went without overcoats though it was November. And then suddenly a north wind blew in, the blue sky paled, and by evening — winter.

Andrei Ivanych and Marusya didn't light a fire; they sat listening intently to the rustling of the twilight. The air filled with plump flakes as mounds of snow formed, blue and quiet. Quietly it sang a lullaby — float, float, rock in the waves of the twilight, listen, lull away the sadness...

Andrei Ivanych purposely sat away from Marusya in the far corner of the couch: it was better that way. That way there would be only what was most delicate, most white — the snow.

"There, the tree's all white now," Marusya thought out loud, "and there's a bird on the white tree. It's been dozing for an hour or two already; it doesn't want to fly away..."

Quiet twinkling of snow through the window. Quiet pain in the heart.

"Winter has finally come to us here in the country," responded Andrei Ivanych. "In winter the dogs bark in a special way. You remember, don't you? It's soft and resonant. Resonant, that's it. And at twilight, the smoke from the threshing floor hangs over the white roofs and looks so

cozy. All is blue, quiet; an old woman walks up with buckets on a yoke..."

Marusya's face with its closed eyes was so tender, slightly bluish from the blue snow outside; and what lips she had... In order not to see — for it was better not to see — Andrei Ivanych also closed his eyes.

But when they lit the lamp, nothing was there anymore, nothing of what had been visible without the lamp.

And all those words about the bird dozing on a snow-covered tree, about the blue evening — they all seemed so paltry, so ordinary, even a little funny.

But they were never to be forgotten.

6. The Horses' Fodder

A Russian stove, as you know has a special kind of gullet: insatiable. One sheaf gets burned and another and a tenth, and it's still not enough; and so another is crammed in. Such was the general at dinner: he had already eaten soup and piroshki stuffed with meat; he had dined on buckwheat porridge served with almond milk; he had put away about a dozen ravioli; and then he had remained seated for two portions of a Circassian meat dish stewed in red wine. Now the rabbit cook was carrying in a new delicacy — some kind of intricate paté smelling strongly of pepper and nutmeg: well, how could he refuse paté? The general's soul wanted the paté, but by this time his belly was already full. But the general was cunning: he knew how to make the weak flesh do the spirit's bidding.

"Larka, get me a vase!" croaked the general.

Larka the samovar went into action and in an instant

brought the general a large, long and thin vase made of painted Chinese porcelain. The general turned to the side and made himself more comfortable in ancient Roman style.

Afterward, he took a breath "ugh!" and helped himself to a piece of paté.

The hostess for the evening wasn't the general's wife: if you put her at the head of the table, she'd be sure to make trouble. Sitting in as hostess was the general's sister-in-law, Agniya, who had a pointed, freckled nose. The general's wife had settled herself some some distance away. She ate practically nothing; her eyes were blank; she just kept sipping out of her glass.

Once he had dined, the general grew expansive:

"Now tell me, Agniya, do you know when a lady is closest to an officer? Well, do you know?"

The freckled, stiff, faded Agniya, smelling some sort of dirty trick, began to fidget about on her chair. No, she didn't know...

"Shame on you! How can that be? A lady is closest to an officer when she serves under... When she serves where? Where? Do you get it?"

Agniya became flustered, turned bright red, and began to cough. She wished that the earth would open up: after all, she was a maiden lady — and all of a sudden such...obscene... But the general roared with laughter: at first down low, on the bottom of a murky swamp, and then up high, like a shrill frog.

Shutting out all this, Agniya concentrated on the paté; with her eyes glued to the plate, quickly, quickly she guided the tiny morsels into her mouth. But the general was slowly, slowly leaning in her direction. He froze — then shouted at her in a bass voice that seemed to come from a bottomless pit:. "Boo!"

Agniya screeched at the top of her lungs; then she started jumping up and down in her chair, blinking her eyes and wailing:

"Stop it... stop it... stop it..."

This same "stop it" came out at least twenty times, until finally she added softly "get away... stop it, get away..." This was nothing new for Agniya: out of boredom the general often jumped out at her from behind corners — and she was used to it.

The general dearly loved to hear Agniya's wails; he would turn beet-red, unable to catch his breath — roar with laughter:

"Ho ho ho, what a bawler, what a loony, what a raving fool, ho ho ho!"

But the general's wife kept sipping, not hearing anything; she was far away in her own world.

Larka chugged in, out of breath.

"Your excellency, Captain Schmidt is here and wishes to see you."

"Schmidt? What the devil... Hell, they don't even give you a chance to eat around here! Oh, well, show him in."

Agniya jumped up from the table and ran into the next room, and soon her freckled nose found its way to the crack in the door. It was the same nose that had once flashed at Andrei Ivanych.

Schmidt walked in, heavy and tall. The floor creaked under him.

"Ah, Nikolai Pe-tro-vich, hello. My dear friend, why don't you have a bite to eat? There's ravioli and it's simply excel-lent! I whipped it up myself; do you think I'd really trust these mangy characters? Ravioli's a dish for connoisseurs, made only from the finest delicacies; bone marrow, parmesan, young celery — none picked earlier than July... Don't refuse, old boy."

Schmidt put a four-cornered pirozhok on his plate, swallowed it indifferently, and began to talk. His voice was even, cutting, harsh, and the unseen ironical grin on his lips was audible...

"Your excellency, Captain Nechesa has been complaining that the horses aren't getting any oats; they're living on nothing but chaff. This is absolutely unthinkable. Of course, Nechesa himself is afraid to come tell you. I don't know what's going on here. Maybe that pet of yours, what's his name... Mundel-Mandel, now what's his..."

The general was in a marvelous mood; he crinkled his eyes and murmured:

"Mendel-Mandel-Mundel-Mondel... Eh, Nikolai Petrovich, my dear friend, this is so unpleasant. So, what else can I do for you? I saw your Marusya the other day. What a pussycat, and so sweet — no doubt about it. And you were the one who snatched her up. So why do you want to stir up trouble for yourself? If I were in your shoes, I'd spit on Nechesa and on everyone else..."

Schmidt sat silently. His iron-gray, small, deep-set eyes sank still more deeply into his head. His narrow lips contracted and became narrower still.

Only then did the general's wife hear Schmidt; she had caught only a fragment and she asked jaggedly: "Nechesa?"

Then she forgot and once again fell silent. In the crack in the door a sharp, freckled nose was bobbing up and down.

Insistently, and now angrily, Schmidt repeated:

"Once again, I consider it my duty to report to your excellency: the horses' fodder is disappearing somewhere. I wouldn't like to venture a guess who — Mundel or not Mundel..."

Again the general's wife woke up suddenly. she heard the word "Mundel" and blurted out:

"Fodder? That has nothing to do with Mundel, but him,"

she nodded at the general. "He doesn't have enough money for his meals. He spends so much on food," — and she began to laugh almost merrily.

Schmidt fixed his steely gaze on the general:

"I've known that for a long time, if you really want to know the truth. And one more thing: money is disappearing, the three-ruble notes that the soldiers get from home. People might think it's me — after all, I'm the paymaster. That's something I can't allow."

Schmidt's lips were tightly compressed; his entire face was as calm as ice. But like blue ice strained by rising water — one second and it cracks; with a roar, the spring water bursts forth, smashing and raging.

But the general had already burst. In his subterranean bass, he bellowed:

"Al-low? What's this?" and immediately he let out a furious scream: "Captain Schmidt, stand at attention; you are speaking to General Azancheev!"

Schmidt got up, calm, white. The general also jumped up, flung back his chair, threw himself headlong at Schmidt, and began furiously boxing his ears.

"You punk! You dare not allow me? Me, Azancheev? You know that in twenty-four hours I'll have you..."

He was looking for some way to cut Schmidt to the quick:

"Not long ago you stood here asking me for my permission, that's right, permission, to get married. And now you've caught yourself a fine bitch and you think you're a big shot, and that you can do anything. You fool!"

"What...did...you...say?" one at a time Schmidt snapped out each penetrating word, like .375 caliber bullets.

"I said you've gotten yourself a bitch, just what you think. Wait a while, dear boy, she'll get passed around like all the others here. You're getting too big for your britches!"

Schmidt's hard, jutting chin trembled perceptibly. The

floor creaked; Schmidt took a step — he gave the general a slap as sharp, precise and crisp as Schmidt himself.

And then all hell broke loose, which is what happens when kids sliding down a mountain on slabs of ice crash into each other at the very bottom: snow flies up from the shattered snow drift, the toboggan lies there with its runners in the air, and you can hear screams of delight and wails of chagrin.

Larka rushed about and obligingly offered a chair; the general flopped into it like a sack. The crack in the door widened. Agniya the sister-in-law jumped out convulsively and crazily wailed: "Stop it, stop it, stop it, get away..." The general's wife kept holding the glass in her hand and jaggedly, bleakly, laughed — the way a screech owl laughs in a bell tower at night.

Voiceless, the general grunted hoarsely in his subterranean bass:

"A courtmartial... I'll drag you!"

Schmidt answered crisply, in his best soldierly manner.

"Yes, sir, your excellency."

And he made a left-face.

Larka loved such powerful scenes; he turned his head contentedly, puffed like a samovar, and touched the general up with a napkin. Agniya gasped and the general's wife continued to sip from her glass.

7. Human Debris

Molochko fastened onto Andrei Ivanych like a leech.

"Hold on now. You've been here a whole month and not once have you dropped in at the Officers' Club, can you

imagine? This is really swinish on your part. Most likely you traipse over to the Schmidts' every day."

Andrei Ivanych turned noticeably red. ("It's true; if I went to the Schmidts' again today, it would be conclusive, it would mean admitting...") What it was that would be conclusive and what he would be admitting, Andrei Ivanych hadn't dared to tell even himself.

"All right, the hell with you, I'll go," said Andrei Ivanych, brushing off Molochko.

More than a dozen overcoats hung in the cloakroom. The paint was not yet dry: feet were sticking to the floor and the air smelled of turpentine. Molochko kept babbling into Andrei Ivanych's ear, stuffing his head with all kinds of rubbish:

"Now what have we here? Isn't that a brand new watchtower up there? No, but you can't imagine what I heard. They've supposedly invented a new kind of fireproof paint, how do you like that, eh? No, but did you read about the French theater that burned down, eh? A hundred people, how do you like that? I keep up with literature..."

The room upstairs was choked with smoke that was thick enough to slice. And this hubbub, this murky haze, teemed not with people, but with human debris: up above was someone's bald head like a watermelon; down below, severed by a cloud, were Captain Nechesa's pigeon-toed feet; a bit farther, suspended in the air, was a bouquet of hairy fists.

The human debris floated, wriggled, existed independently in the murky haze — like fish in the glass cage of some fantastic aquarium.

"Ah, Polovets, it's been a long time old man, a long time!"

"Where did you disappear to; why haven't you been coming over?"

The human debris swarmed around Andrei Ivanych,

began to make a racket, and squeezed in closer. Molochko dived into the haze and disappeared. Captain Nechesa introduced some new faces: Nesterov, Ivanenko, and someone else. But everyone struck Andrei Ivanych in the same way: as fish in an aquarium.

The haze parted to disclose two green tables. Candles smeared a dim light on the faces. Andrei Ivanych forced his way forward — to have a look: how do they play here in this godforsaken hole? With the same zeal as in far-off Tambov, or have they already gotten bored, fed up?

Above the table hung the bald, watermelon-like, dimly gleaming head. The cards were laid out in even rows. The watermelon wrinkled its forehead, whispered something, and poked at the cards with a finger.

"What's this?" Andrei Ivanych turned to Captain Nechesa.

Nechesa sniffed several times and said:

"Science has many rigs."

"Rigs?"

"Well, sure. Come on now, did you just fall from the sky? It's a trick."

"But why...why isn't anybody playing cards? I thought..." Andrei Ivanych was already backing off. He saw that everyone around him was smirking.

Captain Nechesa, with good-natured truculence, barked out:

"We tried it, my friend, we tried it; we used to play... But then we stopped. And that's that."

"But why?"

"'We've got a lot of geniuses, my friend, when it comes to cards. They play very well indeed. So, it isn't worthwhile..."

Andrei Ivanych felt embarrassed, as if he were guilty of the fact that they played so well.

At about nine o'clock the entire horde moved out to get

dinner. In their wake, floating from the card room to the dining room, came the tobacco smoke, and once again the murky clouds teemed with self-propelled human debris: heads, hands, noses.

In the dining room they spotted the grievously long and illegally left-tilted nose of Lt. Tikhmen. Everyone cheered up.

"Ah, Tikhmen! How's your Petyashka?"

"Is he cutting teeth? He must be a lot of trouble for you, eh?"

Captain Nechesa smiled blissfully. Nothing in the world got through to him now: he was saturating himself with flavored vodka. Tikhmen answered seriously and anxiously:

"The little tyke isn't so good, I'm afraid. He's going to have trouble with those teeth."

A volley of uncontrollable guffaws, straight from the gut.

Tikhmen caught on, wearily threw up his hands, and sat down next to Andrei Ivanych.

At the end of the table, serving as host, sat Schmidt. Even sitting, he was taller than everyone else. Schmidt rang. A bold, shifty-eyed soldier with a patch on one knee jumped up.

("He's got to be a thief.") — Andrei Ivanych thought for some reason, staring at the patch.

A minute later, the soldier with the patch brought in on a tray a huge Japanese tumbler made of green glass. Everyone started yelling and guffawing:

"Ah, time to christen Polovets! Go ahead, Schmidt."

"Let's call him Leviathan!"

"All right, old boy, now your name is Leviathan. Well, what do you think?"

Andrei Ivanvch downed the brutal mixture of wormwood and quinine, bugged out his eyes, choked and gasped

for breath. Someone offered him a chair and then everyone promptly forgot about the newly christened soul, or else he was unconscious...

When Andrei Ivanych came to, he heard the sound of a rasping voice, mournfully-monotonously repeating the same thing over and over:

"It's no joke. If I only knew... It's no joke... If I only knew for sure... If I only..."

Slowly and painfully Andrei Ivanych understood: it was Tikhmen. He asked:

"What? If you only knew what?"

"...If I only knew for sure: is Petyashka mine or not?"

("He's drunk. And I don't...")

At that moment howls of laughter knocked Andrei Ivanych right off his feet. They were all guffawing, collapsing on the table, dying with laughter. Someone was repeating the punch line to a dirty joke.

Now Molochko began telling a story: they must have been telling stories now for quite a while. Flushed, Molochko blurted everything out with all his might and the weighty, Russian words hung suspended in the air.

Suddenly from the end of the table, Schmidt shouted out harshly and firmly:

"Shut up, you fool. That's enough! I won't allow this to continue!"

Molochko sat up in his chair with a jerk, jumped up, and immediately sat back down. Hesitantly he said:

"Shut up yourself."

He fell silent. And they all fell silent. In the haze flashed and swayed the human debris: red faces, noses, glazed eyes.

Someone started singing, very quietly and hoarsely; then he started howling like a dog at the melancholy silver of the moon. First at one end of the table and then at the other, the men picked up the tune; more and more of them threw

back their heads and joined the chorus. Finally, all of them, dolefully, harmoniously, were howling like wolves:

A preacher had a dog,
It was like a daughter.
The dog once ate a frog,
So the preacher shot her.
Then he buried deep his dog,
Put a stone upon the grave.
And on the stone he wrote:
A preacher had a dog...

The clock struck ten. This endless circle of words, as meaningless as their lives, cast a spell; the men, with their heads thrown back, kept howling and howling. They grew sad; they remembered something. Remembered what?

Dong: half past ten. And suddenly, with horror, Andrei Ivanych felt that he too wanted desperately to start singing, to howl like all the rest. That he, Andrei Ivanych, was on the verge of singing, was on the verge of howling — and then...

("What's happening? Have I gone crazy...have we all gone crazy?") His hair stood on end.

...So the preacher shot her.
Then he buried deep his dog,
Put a stone upon the grave.
And on the stone he wrote:
A preacher had a dog...

And Andrei Ivanych would have started singing and howling, but Tikhmen, who had been sitting to the right, had slowly crawled under the table, grabbed Andrei Ivanych around the legs, and had quietly — maybe only Andrei Ivanych could hear — started whimpering mournfully:

"Ah, my Petyashka, ah, Petyashka..."

Andrei Ivanych jumped up and pulled out his legs in fright. He ran over to where Schmidt was sitting. Schmidt wasn't singing. His eyes were stern, sober.

("There he is; he's the only one who can save me...")

"Schmidt, take me away; I'm not well. Why are they singing?"

Schmidt grinned and got up. The floor began to creak beneath him. They left.

Schmidt said:

"Look at you." and firmly gripped his hand.

("That's good, firm... It means he must still...")

Still more firmly, more painfully. ("Should I yell? No...") Crunching bones, hellish pain. ("But what about Schmidt, is Schmidt crazy too?") Still, Andrei Ivanych didn't yell, he hung on.

"You're not so bad, after all; you can take it"; Schmidt grinned and stared intently into Andrei Ivanych's eyes. That grin enveloped the huge forehead and also the teeny pug nose that had taken refuge underneath the forehead.

8. Sonata

The entire next day was dull and dreary. And when evening crawled through the window, the dullness muffled and engulfed everything. Polovets found it impossible to stay by himself, and so — a confrontation. He gave in and went to the Schmidts'.

("The Schmidts have a piano and I really should play a little. Otherwise I'll forget everything I know...") — Andrei

Ivanych schemed against Andrei Ivanych.

Marusya said unhappily:

"Have you heard? Schmidt's been sent to the guardhouse for three days. What for? He didn't even tell me. He was just astonished that it was so little — three days. He said he thought that... Do you know why?"

"Something happened between him and the general, but I don't know what..."

Andrei Ivanych immediately sat down at the piano. Cheerfully he looked over his music. ("So Schmidt's not here. So he's been locked up.")

He chose the Grieg sonata. Andrei Ivanych had long ago fallen in love with it: somehow, from the very beginning, it had spoken to him. Now he began to play it — and at once, amid the dullness began to glow a green, sun-drenched island, and on it...

Andrei Ivanych pressed down on the left pedal, everything inside him began to tremble. ("All right, then — *piano, molto piano...*") — he implored. ("*Pianissimo:* morning — a golden gossamer... And now *forte* — now the sun appears — now my heart is wide-open. Only for you — here, wide-open — look...")

She was sitting on a homemade ottoman covered with Chinese silk. With her tiny fist, she propped up her sad, narrow face. She was looking at the faraway sun — so very far away.

Andrei Ivanych was now playing a short, sorrowful movement in four flats.

... *Piano, adagio, adagio* — his heart stopped, he couldn't breathe. *Staccato* — a dry whisper — outstretched, imploring hands, agonizingly parched lips, someone on his knees... ("You must listen. Look, just look — I've even gone down on my knees... Tell me, is there anything else you need? Anything you want...")

And suddenly — *forte* and *sforzando.* The mocking, chromatic chords came faster and faster. It seemed to Andrei Ivanych that this came from him — that perhaps he himself possessed such divine wrath. Trembling, he struck the last three blows — and silence.

He finished — and there was nothing — no wrath, no sun, simply him — Andrei Ivanych. And when he turned around to Marusya, he heard:

"Yes, that was good. Very..." She drew herself up. "You know, Schmidt is cruel and strong. And yet I like submitting even to his cruelties. Do you understand: in everything, to the end..."

A gossamer — and death. A sonata — and Schmidt. It seemed to make no sense, and yet..

Andrei Ivanych got up from the piano and started pacing up and down, pacing on the rug.

"What's the matter? Finish it. You haven't done the minuet."

"No, I'm not going to play any more; I'm tired," and he kept pacing up and down on the rug.

"..I lie like a rug, you lie like a rug," suddenly Marusya began to amuse herself and again became a cheerful, fluffy teddy bear.

She drove out of Andrei Ivanych his thoughts about Schmidt and he burst out laughing:

"You're quite a scamp, aren't you?"

"Oh what a wicked girl I was — you should have seen me! They used to tie me to the buffet with a cord so I couldn't go on a rampage."

"You mean to say you're not on a cord now?" Andrei Ivanych teased.

"Hmmm...maybe you're right. Maybe I'm still on a cord. But everything I did then was intended to make things fall and break — accidentally. I was pretty shrewd. I can

remember one time: we had a garden with some plum trees in it. There was a cholera epidemic in town. I was strictly forbidden to eat any unwashed plums. But it's boring to wash them and it takes a long time. And so I thought up a plan: I would take a plum in my mouth, lick it all over until it was clean, and then eat it. After all, it was clean — why not eat it?"

They both laughed with all their hearts, like children. ("Laugh some more, laugh harder!") — Andrei Ivanych thought to himself. But Marusya had already stopped laughing; sadness appeared once again on her lips.

"You know, I don't laugh much here. It's dreary here. Maybe even frightening."

Andrei Ivanych recollected the day before, the snouts howling at the moon, and how he himself had wanted suddenly to start singing...

"Yes, maybe even frightening," he said.

Unheard, the orderly, Neprotoshnov, walked in and stood rooted in the doorway. They didn't see him. He coughed:

"Your excellency. Madam..."

Andrei Ivanych looked into his fish eyes with malevolent envy: ("He gets to be here every day, always near...")

"Lt. Molochko is here."

"Tell him to come in," said Marusya, turning to Andrei Ivanych and wrinkling her brow with annoyance and amusement.

("It means she wanted, she wanted just the two of us...") — and Andrei Ivanych greeted Molochko joyfully.

Molochko entered and promptly began to bob up and down and chatter: his words spilled out like peas from a torn sack... Good God! It didn't matter whether they listened or not: Molochko talked and chuckled at his own words.

"And yesterday Tikhmen crawled around under the table, can you imagine? And kept going on about his Petyashka...

"And Captain Nechesa has a misfortune: Arzhanoi, one of his soldiers, has disappeared. The scoundrel runs away every winter...

"And in Paris, can you imagine, one hundred deputies were at a dinner, and afterward, when they began to count, it turned out that five silver plates had disappeared. Can you believe it — deputies? I thought about it the whole way here and I know that tonight I won't be able to sleep..."

"Yes, it's apparent that you do follow literature closely." Andrei Ivanych smiled.

"I told you so, didn't I? Of course, of course! I follow literature very closely."

Andrei Ivanych and Marusya stealthily exchanged glances, barely able to conceal their laughter. And it was so nice, so nice: the two of them, like conspirators...

Andrei Ivanych loved Molochko at that moment. ("Let's hear some more, old pal, tell us some more...")

And Molochko told them about the time he was at a fire. A fireman jumped down from the third floor without breaking his neck, "can you imagine?" And how a commissioned officer once made a young soldier plug up a rifle with his finger: that way, he said, the bullet wouldn't fall out.

"And it tore his finger clean off, can you imagine?"

Marusya had already laughed herself out; all her laughter was spent — and now she sat unsmiling. Andrei Ivanych stood up to go.

They said goodby. ("Kiss her hand or not?") But Molochko jumped up first, bowed, and smacked Marusya's hand for a long time. Andrei Ivanych simply shook it.

9. Two Tikhmens

Lt. Tikhmen had good reason to crawl under the table: his affairs were a colossal mess.

Tikhmen suffered from a certain disease: a tendency to think. And in these parts, that disease was most regrettable. He'd have been better off guzzling vodka in front of a mirror, or playing cards around the clock — anything but this.

Well-meaning people kept on explaining that to Tikhmen. But he stuck to his guns. Well, he kept reading, of course, and he hit upon the following thought: "Everything in the world is just illusion, my impression, a creation of my will. Now take Captain Nechesa — an impression? And what about the general himself?"

But Tikhmen was the type that gets something in his head and then can't get it out. And so he continued in his contempt for the world, for the female sex, for child production; Tikhmen didn't talk about love in any other way. And as for children — he always saw them as a pain in the ass.

"Now wait a minute, what are you trying to tell me? In my opinion, all parents are idiots, suckers who took the bait hook, line and sinker. Children we call them... But try to get ahead, to get ahead — it's like being chained to a wheelbarrow, it's the end... To outlive their usefulness and be sold for scrap — that's what's ahead for parents... But meanwhile, gentlemen, you laugh — so the hell with you!"

And how could you keep from laughing if Tikhmen's nose was so long and bent to the left and if he flailed his arms like a windmill? And how could you keep from laughing if Tikhmen, without exception, was a great skeptic in his sober state and then the minute he has a drop...

But after all, here in the boondocks, in this mousetrap, in this, forgive the expression, this godforsaken hole — who wouldn't drink?

Having had a drink, Tikhmen invariably had the same dream: a castle, a beautiful lady in a blue and silver dress, and, in front of her — Knight Tikhmen with a lowered visor. A knight with his visor — this was most convenient because a visor allowed Tikhmen to cover his nose, leaving only his lips exposed — in a word, he became handsome. And there, by the light of torches, the mystery of love is consummated. Life flows so languidly, so quickly, and golden-haired children appear...

However, after sobering up, Tikhmen would curse himself as an idiot and a sucker with no less fervor than he had his neighbors, and he infused himself with still more hatred for that substance that plays such games with people and that they so flippantly nickname "spirits."

A year ago...yes, that's right: it's already been almost a year to the day since those ironic "spirits" had so cruelly made fun of Tikhmen.

It was Christmas season — an absurd, slovenly, dead-drunk, local kind of Christmas. On the very first day Lt. Tikhmen made the rounds, got soused, and returned home late — a knight with lowered visor.

Captain Nechesa wasn't home and the children had been put to bed long before by the captain's orderly, Lomailov. At the head of the festively arrayed table sat Captain Nechesa's wife, alone and bored: after all, the first day is always festively boring.

With unaccustomed gallantry, Knight Tikhmen kissed the hand of the beautiful lady. And taking from her dainty hands a portion of goose, he intoned:

"How glad I am that night has fallen."

"And what makes you glad it's night?"

A sober Tikhmen would have amiably given the main reason: "Because after dark all cats are gray." But Knight Tikhmen said: "Because the night reveals to us the beauty that daylight conceals."

That caught the fancy of the captain's wife: she promptly began to flaunt her countless dimples; she shook the little round ringlets on her forehead and turned all her charms loose on Tikhmen.

They finished eating and retired to the lady's boudoir, that is — her bedroom.

Once again: a sober Tikhmen would have fled in terror from this love nest, from the two elephantine beds, and the two Chinese dressing gowns slumbering side by side on a rack — dressing gowns in which the captain and his wife sashayed around early in the morning and late in the evening. But Knight Tikhmen willingly and joyfully entered this castle after the beautiful lady.

Here the knight and his lady sat down to play "carriage." With a pencil stub they drew circle cities and for a long time drove around trying to confuse each other.

Subsequently the knight guided his lady's hand as it passed over the paper — in order to lighten her load. In this fashion they gradually arrived at the lady's bed...

But for that accursed day, what would all those foolish jokes about Petyashka have meant to Tikhmen? Zero, he wouldn't have given a good goddamn! But now... the devil knows, maybe it was true about Petyashka...

"Oh you dolt, idiot, sucker!"

And so Tikhmen would gnash his teeth and curse the day he was born...

But drunk, he grieved about not knowing for sure whose Petyashka really was. Just like that the drunkard's heart broke in two. And worst of all, there was no way even to find out. Was it true or not?

But today Tikhmen was walking on air when he returned from a dinner party at the general's; he knew what to do, he knew how to find out about Petyashka.

"What's this, has she eaten? Well I'll find out anyway," Tikhmen was tempting the mysterious substance.

It was not yet late; a sumptuous feast was still in full swing at the general's. Nechesa was still there, but Tikhmen purposely, specifically in order to find out, sneaked home — and headed straight for the boudoir.

The captain's wife was still in bed: from frequent childbirth something inside her had gone haywire and for a whole month now she hadn't been able to muster the strength to recover.

"Hello, Katyushka," Tikhmen kissed her small round hand.

"My dear, you're so polite, like...like you were then. Don't forget there are children present."

Everything looked as it had on that sacred evening: the elephant-like beds, the dressing gowns on the rack. Only now — children: eight souls, eight wretches, each one smaller than the next. And behind them, like a bear on its hind paws, stood the orderly, Yashka Lomailov.

"Send the children out, I have something to say."

The captain's wife nodded at Yashka. He and the eight children vanished into thin air.

"Well, what the hell's on your mind now?" the captain's wife asked angrily. But inside, her curiosity began to blaze: ("What can this idiot possibly want?")

For a long time Tikhmen kept beating around the bush; he was utterly incapable of saying what was on his mind.

"You see, Katyusha... Maybe I could get this thing cleared up right away about... Well, in a word, what I really want to know is: is Petyashka mine for sure — or not?"

Although the captain's wife's eyes were already round, at

this they grew even rounder and silently fixed themselves on Tikhmen. Then she burst out laughing, shaking the small curls on her forehead.

"Look at the fool, and oh, how the fool makes me laugh, oh, really! Well, and if I don't know — then what?"

"Is it true — you don't know?"

"Such a queer fish! How should I know — it'd be hard for me to say what might have happened. I don't know — and that's all there is to it. Just look where the interrogator has ended up now!"

("Even she doesn't know; now it's all over,") — Tikhmen went into his own room, crestfallen.

In the corridor he banged into Captain Nechesa. He too was walking along in a daze.

"Damn you! What's the matter, why is your nose to the ground like that?" swore the captain.

Tikhmen looked at Nechesa:

"And why is yours to the ground?"

"Oh brother! I've got troubles: Arzhanoi ran away — but that's nothing. Now he's been found and it turns out he did in a Chink."

"But as for me..." and without finishing, Tikhmen shrugged his shoulders hopelessly.

10. Soldier Boys, Bravo; Brave Lads!

If you're after a real muzhik — the genuine article — find one who's trotted behind a wood plow and sniffed the earth — he'll never forget the smell of the earth as long as he lives. That must be how it was with Arzhanoi. Suppose Arzhanoi is sent for water on the company's Pegasus —

why, he sails down the road at such a clip, my hat is off to him. Or suppose they stick a shovel in his paws — why, the clods fly thick and fast. The hole seems to dig itself. And that's how it is with every practical matter. But put him in formation — he stands there and gawks. He drove Captain Nechesa crazy: a strapping first-rate man like Arzhanoi and he stands there gawking no matter what you do...

"Arzhanoi! Why do you stand there like a scarecrow or a bump on a log? What are you thinking about anyway? What's going on in that noodle of yours?"

But the devil himself knows; maybe it can't be put into words. It must be the dewy, spring morning. The plowed fields are steaming; the plowshare is fat with earth, gorged with soil. And in the sky — a lark. And the secret of it all seemed to be in that very kestrel, that lark. And Arzhanoi kept his head turned upward, his mouth agape: isn't that, he says, a lark up there?

"Arzhanoi, big mouth, level your bayonet right down the middle, or can't you see?"

Arzhanoi looked at the bayonet — just see how the sun plays on it! He watches and he thinks: "Out of this very bayonet, for example, you could forge a plowshare. And oh what a plowshare it would make — just right for virgin soil!"

And yet all this was neither here nor there; all this was a private matter. The fact remained that Arzhanoi had sinned — he had done in a Chink — and there was no getting around it. Now Nechesa would have to go to the general with the whole thing, good God...

Captain Nechesa shook his shaggy head, which in turn shook the small bluish nose that had gone astray in his beard and mustache.

"How could you, Arzhanoi? Who put you up to this? How come?"

While on the run, Arzhanoi had acquired a thick stubble. His cheekbones seemed more prominent, he was more weatherbeaten, he had entrusted himself to the earth.

"It went this way, yer honor. They says to me, these damn soldiers, they says that these here Chinks is going down the main road bold as you please carryin' deer horns. And them horns is worth, give or take, five hundred... So I just ran off to keep an eye on them Chinks..."

The captain started to stamp his feet at Arzhanoi, he started barking at him wildly, he started swearing at him — up one side and down the other. But Arzhanoi just stood there grinning: he knew that Captain Nechesa wouldn't hurt a soldier. And as for the cursing — nothing to worry about — sticks and stones...

Only when Arzhanoi heard that he had to face the general did he lose his nerve: he actually turned white with fear.

Captain Nechesa noticed this and plugged up his fountain of curses. He poured out half a glass of vodka and angrily shoved it at Arzhanoi.

"Here you go, drink up! Don't be scared; maybe we can get you out of this somehow."

Arzhanoi was led to his cell; the captain paced uneasily up and down the room.

"A bastard like that goes and gets into trouble and expects you to get him out of it, to clear him. What's more, we've got to take him by the hand and go see the general or else it's a courtmartial for sure..."

The captain continued to pace the floor and fret. Then he broke into his favorite song: the only one, in fact, that he ever sang:

Soldier boys, bravo; brave lads,
But where are your wives?

Meanwhile Katyushka was being visited by one of her swains: good God, she laughs so roundly, so resonantly. And there's no point in even approaching Tikhmen. He walks around blacker than a thundercloud. It used to be you could play checkers with him and during the game forget your troubles and sorrows for a bit... Ekhh!

Throwing up his hands, the captain took out his horn-rimmed glasses. The captain read without the aid of glasses. He wore them for only two activities: the first — when he was repairing some portion of his attire, but the second...

Captain Nechesa picked up his weapon — a cheap needle, especially inserted by his orderly Lomailov into a fine walnut pen. He struck up his favorite, and only, song and ambled around the dining room next to the walls. Without doubt the walls had at one time been covered with a superb blue wallpaper. But of that wallpaper there now remained only an unpleasant memory, and on this memory were crawling reddish, bewhiskered cockroaches.

> ...Our wives — the guns are loaded,
> That's where our wives are!
> Soldier boys bravo; brave...

"Aha, you devil, I've got you! Take that!"

On the cheap needle quivered a reddish cockroach. It was no doubt the glasses that made the captain's face owlish, ferocious and even shaggy — Lord save us... With bloodthirsty satisfaction the captain peered at the cockroach, threw his catch down to the floor and blissfully crunched it with his foot...

> See our sisters — sharpened sabers.
> That's where our sisters...

"Aha, whoever you are, so you were crawling into the buffet? Will you be crawling now? Will you?"

And to look at Captain Nechesa right at the moment — it was just plain frightening: brute, monster, pick your own name for him. But anyone who has broken bread with the captain knows very well that the captain is ferocious only with cockroaches. Beyond that he doesn't go.

Take the captain's wife, for example: the captain's wife has herself a baby every year and one looks like the aide de camp, another like Molochko, a third like Ivanenko... But Captain Nechesa takes it all in stride. Maybe he simply doesn't know; maybe he thinks, "never mind, they're all cute little mites; they're all God's angels." Or maybe it's simply impossible to act otherwise in such places — in such a godforsaken hole, where every woman, even the most good-for-nothing one, sets a high price on herself. Nevertheless, Captain Nechesa loved all eight of his children, not to mention number nine, Petyashka. He loved them all equally and fussed over each and every one.

And even now, having wiped his cockroach-smeared hands on his pants, he went to the nursery to calm his anxiety about Arzhanoi. Eight ragged, gleeful, grubby ragamuffins... And for a long time, until it got too dark, he played hopscotch with the urchins.

The orderly Yashka Lomailov, Bruin, was sitting on a bench in the entrance hall, holding a candle and attaching a patch to the knee of his stiff pants: the poor devil's clothes were threadbare.

And from Lady Nechesa's boudoir, that is the bedroom with the elephant beds, came the sound of merry laughter. Oh, for shame! Let's hope the summer won't see the arrival of number ten!

11. A Great Woman

By written order Schmidt was dispatched to the city. He was more than just a little surprised. It's true enough that it was a question of formally receiving shipment of some new sighting mounts, but in the past such errands had been assigned to the small fry — to some second lieutenant or other. But all of the sudden he, Captain Schmidt, had to go. Well, all right...

He left. Andrei Ivanych and Marusya were at the dock. They saw Schmidt off and then started home together. The ice on the puddles snapped under their feet with a cold crunch. The earth — frozen, dull, bleak — lay there like an unkempt corpse.

"All around us now there's softness, snow, drifts," Marusya said. She buried her chin deeper into the soft fur: she became still more like some sort of timid, downy, precious teddy bear.

To the right, the steep slopes, shaggy from the forest, were turning black. Below lay a misty valley. And stirring in the mist, standing right next to the road like beggars, were seven rickety wooden crosses.

"The Seven Crosses, have you heard of them?" Marusya nodded in their direction.

Andrei Ivanych shook his head: no. He was afraid to move his tongue; if he did, everything might take off and fly away — all that was now beating inside him and was so frightening to name.

"Seven young officers — they did it to themselves... And it wasn't so very long ago, maybe eight or nine years. All of them — in the course of a single year, as if from a plague. It was impossible, after all, for them to be put in the cemetery..."

("...Seven. How did they do it — separately or all at once? ...The Officers' Club, a preacher had a dog... Ugh, what nonsense! A plague! Maybe it was — love?")

This was the path along which Andrei Ivanych rushed and he said aloud:

"What is love anyway? It's an illness. People who are mentally ill... I don't know why no one has tried to cure it with hypnosis. It would probably work."

Andrei Ivanych searched for her eyes to find out if she had heard what he was saying, what he wanted to say. But her eyes were hidden.

"That might be," Marusya said to herself. "An illness... Like sleepwalkers, like cataleptics. To endure every pain, every torment, to crucify oneself for...for... Oh, everything's fine, everything's lovely!"

Now Andrei Ivanych saw her eyes. They glittered; they sparkled. But for whom, about whom?

("I'll tell her today, I'll tell her everything.") — Andrei Ivanych began to shake with a slight, very sharp tremor that he heard like a string plucked somewhere at the far right-hand edge of a keyboard — it kept ringing and ringing.

Before entering the village, they stopped one last time to look back at the sky. Twilight was blazing in the lacerated clouds: something alarmingly red splashed up from below and congealed, hovered, drooped, enlarged...

The Schmidts' dear, timbered dining room. The familiar smell — either yellow rattle or St. John's Wort. Before, though, everything here had been simple, natural, peaceful, but now it was all in motion, changing every second, continually crackling. And never before had Andrei Ivanych seen the lamp's red, quivering tongue.

Marusya was overly cheerful. She was telling a story:

"Schmidt was still a cadet in white canvas... Even then he was cruel and stubborn. I wanted so much for him to kiss

me, but he... I was sitting on a swing. It was hot. So I thought to myself 'we'll see!' Suddenly I fell off the swing and hit the ground — thud..."

There was a knock at the door. In chugged the general's samovar-shiny Larka. Somewhere behind him, standing like a statue in the gloom, was Neprotoshnov. Marusya nodded cheerfully to Larka, tore open the envelope he had given her and set it on the table: first the story had to be finished.

"...I crashed to the ground and shouted: 'Oh, I've hurt myself!' Schmidt's heart couldn't bear this, of course: 'where does it hurt?' he said, 'where?' I pointed at my shoulder: 'right here.' So of course he... But I wanted it on my lips too! So on the lips... As you can see, we women can be cunning if we want to!"

She began to laugh and turn pink; she was the same girl as the one who had once sat on the swing. ("Now, now I'll tell her everything...") — Andrei Ivanych looked at her.

She took out the letter and read it. Slowly the swing sank lower and lower. But the smile still clung to her face, like a frozen autumn bird on a leafless tree: cold weather has come, it's time to fly away, but the bird just sits there tuning up — as if summer hadn't gone by, but clearly that is not the case.

"I don't understand it, I can't... Here, take it," and she gasped. She handed Andrei Ivanych the letter.

> Dearest Madam, sweet Marya Vladimirovna. On November 15th of this year, I was assaulted by your darling hubby (witnesses: my orderly Larka, my wife, and my sister-in-law Agniya, the last of whom saw everything through the crack in the door.). Such things, of course, cannot be paid for by the three days that Captain Schmidt spent in the guardhouse. The matter is a bit more serious: hard labor for a minimum of twelve years. The future course of this matter

— to wit, whether this case is consigned to the discretion of a courtmartial or to eternal oblivion — depends entirely on you, sweet lady Marya Vladimirovna. If you would like to make amends for your hubby, then please pay me a visit tomorrow at twelve o'clock, before lunch. And if you choose not to — that, my dearest, is your privilege. But if you were to come, you'd make this old man so very happy!

Your admirer,
Azancheev

Marusya clung to Andrei Ivanych's eyes and with a chilly, disbelieving smile begged him to say that it wasn't true, that nothing could happen to Schmidt...

"It isn't true, is it? It isn't true!" It seemed that then and there she would fall down on her knees.

"It's true," was all Andrei Ivanych could say.

"Oh my God!" Marusya sobbed like a child. She put a finger in her mouth and bit it with all her might...

She sat like this for a long time, then turned away. Andrei Ivanych heard strange snatches of what was either a laugh or a death rattle.

"For a minute...in the hall...for God's sake...leave, I must be alone..."

Alone. She got up, walked to the wall, leaned her face against it so no one could see... Everything in her head broke loose and hurtled downhill, out of control. Her mind wandered and she saw — from where? — an icon lamp at holiday time, a mother prostrate before the icon, so strange, folded in two, and one of them, one of the children lay ill.

("But what if I don't go? Then he certainly won't spare Schmidt... No, he won't spare him!")

"Mama!" she cried out softly.

No one answered.

"Virgin Mother, you have always loved me, always... Don't

forsake me, Mother. I have no one, no one..."

When Andrei Ivanych again walked into the cheerful timbered dining room, there was no Marusya. Marusya — the happy little girl on the swing — had died. What Andrei Ivanych saw was a stern, doleful woman who had buried her former self: those deep wrinkles at the corners of her mouth — could they be anything but vestiges of the burial? And let life start plowing these furrows even deeper — a Russian woman can endure and rise above anything.

Marusya said calmly, only now very softly:

"Andrei Ivanych, please...go tell the orderly that it's all right, that I..."

"You? You'll go?"

"Yes, after all, I must — otherwise..."

Everything inside Andrei Ivanych began to shake and become blurry. He got down on his knees; his lips trembled; he groped for words...

"You...you...you are a great woman... How I loved you."

He lacked the courage to say "I love you." Marusya looked down at him calmly. But her hands, her fingers were tightly clenched.

"It's better for me to be alone. Tomorrow you...no, the day after tomorrow...come when Schmidt arrives. I can't face him alone..."

No moon, no stars, an oppressive sky. Andrei Ivanych ran down the middle of the street, stumbling over the frozen hummocks.

("No, I can't permit it... It's unthinkable, outrageous. Something must be done, something must be done... A preacher had a dog... Oh heavens, what's that got to do with anything?")

As if in a delirium he ran up to the general's house: indistinct, dark windows; everyone asleep.

("Should I ring? They're all undressed. After all, it's past

midnight. This is absurd, funny...")

He ran around the house once again: no, not a single light. If even just one, only one — then there might be... But as it was — maybe tomorrow would be better?

Andrei Ivanych felt his back pocket:

("I don't even have a pistol. What was I planning to use — my bare hands? Ridiculous, it would end up just being ridiculous! Ekhh!")

So, beside himself, he ran all the way home at breakneck speed. He rang and waited. And suddenly he saw a clear image: Marusya — and the general's belly, maybe even white with green spots like a frog. He clenched his teeth: "Ah, damn it! Damn it to hell!"

But the orderly Guslayaikin, grinning amiably, was already closing the door and locking it.

12. The Benefactor

The general had gotten up extra early today: by nine o'clock he was already in high spirits, had lapped up his coffee and was now sitting in his study. Friday was his day to administer justice and mete out punishment.

"So, Larka, who's here? And look alive; I want you spinning like a top for me today — you understand?"

So saying, the general flopped down on his chair; the chair let out a groan, barely able to keep its legs from buckling. The general ingratiatingly crinkled his eyes and drummed on his belly with his fingers:

("Will my little cupcake come or not? Mmmm, and what a little sweetie she is — such a tender morsel — so jolly... Mmmm!")

At that point, the general was roused by the deep, gruff

bark of Captain Nechesa:

"I'm here concerning Arzhanoi, your excellency, the one who killed the Chink. With your permission, I brought him here to make his report."

("Oh yes, she'll come, my little pet; she'll humor an old man, she'll come...") — the general oozed like a pancake in oil.

("And what's he smirking about, what makes him so pleased?") — Nechesa's eyes widened. He moved closer to the general.

"They're outside, your excellency. Are your orders to bring them in?"

"Yes, bring them in, my boy, bring them in! Just hurry it up a bit..."

They entered the study and stood by the doorway: Arzhanoi — stolid as always, though still bristly and shaggy from his days on the run; with him was the witness, Opyonkin — adorned with pockmarks and a straggly beard — clearly a practiced village gossip, a chatterbox and a blabbermouth to boot.

No doubt horses dragged into the study from the stable would have balked, reared and snorted in terror. Likewise with Arzhanoi and Opyonkin. Even if he used forceps, Captain Nechesa wasn't going to get a single word out of them.

"Now don't be afraid, what's there to be afraid of?" the captain cajoled Opyonkin, "after all you're not the culprit; nothing's going to happen to you."

("Sure, sure. But I knows how the general blows up...") — Opyonkin reared silently. However, he did look around a bit and he did open his mouth. And once it was open, there was no shutting it: he yammered away — and obviously enjoyed the sound of his own voice.

"Well, it wuz jist a Chinaman — an ordinary Chink — a Chink, that's what he wuz. I sees him, in a manner of

speakin', outside o' town. He's jist goin' along mindin' his own business and he's got this here great big bundle on his back. Well, 'course he sez hullo to me and I sez it back. And he starts to mutter the way they does and off he goes... Well, what's with you, you little creep, I sez to him. I tells him I don't unnerstand that kinda talk. How come, I sez, you doesn't talk our way like I does? It's simple, I sez and everbuddy gits it. But he don't pay me no mind — he jist mutters away in his damn-fool talk..."

"Hey, old buddy, you've gotten carried away. You'd better tell us about Arzhanoi. How did you meet him?"

"Arzhanoi, you say? Now lemme think, oh God! Well, he takes to tellin' me about his brother's wife, he tells me about the kids...each one smaller than the next, he sez, and they needs to eat, and their mouths, he sez, is wide open. Their mouths is open, he sez, real wide... And Arzhanoi, he softens me up with them words, softens me right up... I walks along the platement — cryin' my eyes out, you might say, cuz his wife's got ammonia..."

The last remark aroused even the general, who stopped smirking at his own private thoughts and bugged out his froggy eyes:

"Ammonia? What do you mean by that? Ammonia?"

And how is it that the gentlemen don't understand what it means? Now he had gone and gotten Opyonkin all mixed up, and that was the end of it. You just can't interrupt a man that way. Right then and there Opyonkin forgot everything and that's all there was to it.

In his deep, stolid bass, Arzhanoi told his story. The important thing was that they let him go so he could at least dig up the antlers. Or else the damn soldiers would find out about them... Those deer horns were worth a good five-hundred rubles, by God...

"Your excellency, let me go git 'em. It's us peasants' busi-

ness, ya know; we needs the money, taxes is comin' up agin."

Once again the general smiled as he bounced ever so slightly in his chair — like this: up and down, up and down. He tickled himself on the belly:

("Ah, the poor little thing is crying, overflowing with tears... Ah my dear child, what would cheer you up? Maybe I should take pity on you, eh?")

The general shook his head at Arzhanoi:

"Well now, you numbskull! You thought only about the horns. And it means nothing to you to do a man in? You must have pity on a man, my dear boy, pity, that's it."

"Your excel... But they's nothing but Chinks. They ain't real folks. More like big chickens is what they is. Even God don't answer for 'em. Your excel...permit me these horns. After all, the kids has to eat and drink...their mouths is wide-open..."

The general began to guffaw and wriggle about; his belly began to undulate.

"What, what? Like a chicken, you say. Ho ho ho! All right, then, here's what I'll do. Take this son of a bitch... Ho ho! Like a chicken, you say? Take care of him according to our local custom — with a lash, understand? And then let him go get those damn horns, to hell with him. And put him under arrest for ten days, that's all..."

Arzhanoi flopped down on his knees: ("Can it be, them horns is mine?")

"Your excel...my benefactor, kind sir!"

As he was leaving, Captain Nechesa thought:

("There's something funny going on here; he's being awfully kind today!")

The general went on into the parlor, crinkled his eyes and smiled. There at the window sat his spouse, warming in her hand a glass containing something red.

"Whose voice was that I heard, darling? Molochko, perhaps? You're still fooling around with him?"

"Molochko has begun to let himself go," the general's wife gazed absentmindedly into space; "his warts have been spreading most unpleasantly. You should take him in hand..."

Agniya jumped up. She wobbled back and forth; she bobbed up and down next to the general:

"But Molochko was telling us all about Tikhmen. The fellow has gone completely daft. He's still trying to find out whether Petyashka, the captain's wife's ninth, is his..."

Agniya giggled into her bony hand. The general playfully poked her in the ribs:

"And what about you, Agniya, when are you going to have a baby, eh? Maybe you could marry Larka: why should you go to waste?"

But just at that moment, Larka walked in and stood at the door. Agniya spotted him — she started jumping up and down wailing: "Stop-stop-stop, leave me alone..."

Larka chugged fondly up to the general:

"Your excellency, someone is waiting for you... They say they'd like to see you in private."

The general began to quiver all over. ("Has she really and truly come?")

He broke into a run, mincing toward the door. His belly ran on ahead — it stuck out as if the general were trundling it along in a wheelbarrow. His pant legs, which had hiked up, fluttered above his boots.

Agniya had a feeling in her bones that there was something afoot, and saying, "I'll be right back," she flitted away from the general's wife into her own little room.

It was, in fact, a tiny room — hardly more than a closet — yet it was cheerful — decked out with crimson bouquets and wallpaper. It smelled of some kind of pink, pungent

soap. And all the walls had been plastered with portraits cut out of *Niva* and *Rodina:* men's portraits that Agniya had carefully cut out and carted off to her room. There were generals, bishops, and famous scholars.

But the true essence of the room was not in the bouquets, or even in the portraits. It was in the fact that the big portrait of Alexander III concealed a hole, which Agniya had painstakingly and expertly drilled into the general's study. With great curiosity, she now glued her ear to the hole and caught everything as it took place in the study.

13. A Heavy Load

Schmidt returned from the city in the best of spirits: it had been a long time since Andrei Ivanych had seen him this way. The three of them walked from the dock; Schmidt invited him for dinner. Andrei Ivanych was about to refuse, but Schmidt wouldn't even hear of it.

"Say, there's sludge ice moving in the bay," Schmidt said. "Ice floes grinding all around the launch, the motor chugging for all it's worth... Say, that's fine — a struggle!"

He was walking tall, heavy for the earth, gulping the frozen air.

"Struggle," Andrei Ivanych thought out loud, "struggle wears you out. What good is it?"

"Rest tires you out even more," Schmidt grinned.

("He never gets tired.") — Andrei Ivanych looked at Schmidt. ("It wouldn't have occurred to Schmidt that they were asleep, that there wasn't a pistol... And none of this would have happened... And maybe it didn't happen.")

For the first time that day, Andrei Ivanych gathered his

courage and looked at Marusya. Nothing... Only the immobility of her face and her tightly clenched fingers...

("She was there, it...happened.") — Andrei Ivanych froze.

"So Maruska, what have you been doing? What have you been dreaming about?" Schmidt bent down to Marusya. His hard, forged chin disappeared; everything about him became soft.

It sometimes happens that longshoremen try with all their might and main to move a load but still can't make it budge. Sometimes they even sing a work song and strike up a verse cursing the contractor — so, once again! — they heave and strain: it still won't budge, as if held by magic.

And so Marusya tried with all her might and main to smile: she concentrated all her strength on one spot — her lips — and she couldn't, she simply couldn't budge them, and her whole face trembled.

Andrei Ivanych saw this; he watched without breathing: ("My God, if Schmidt were to look back at her now, if only he were to look...")

A second, only one split second, but an endless one — and Marusya got control of herself and smiled. And only her voice trembled in a way that was barely perceptible.

"Heavens, isn't it funny what totally nonsensical things you dream about! All last night I dreamt that I had to divide seventy-eight by four. And then when I thought I'd divided it, figured it all out, I went to write it down and I'd forgotten the number again — it was completely gone. And again seventy-eight by four — I couldn't figure it out, but I knew I had to. It was so frightening, so tormenting..."

"Tormenting" — it was like a small window to the truth. Marusya had found it even pleasant to say that word, to infuse it with all her pain. And once again Andrei Ivanych understood everything — once again he froze, turned to ice.

Schmidt was walking on ahead of them both with his confident, strong, heavy step. Without turning around, he said:

"Come on, Marusya, you seem to take this seriously. You have to know how to thumb your nose at such trifles. As a matter of fact, not only at trifles: at everything..."

And suddenly Schmidt became hateful to Andrei Ivanych. For some reason he recalled the way Schmidt had shaken his hand.

"You...you egoist," Andrei Ivanych said angrily.

"E-go-ist? And what do you think, dear boy, that there are really altruists? Ho ho ho! It's all the same egoism, only in bad taste... They trot after lepers; they do all kinds of rotten things...just for their own gratification..."

("Damn it all...and what about Marusya, what she did? Can it be that he doesn't notice anything, doesn't feel it?")

But Schmidt laughed:

"E-go-ist... And do you know how young ladies write that word? God, who was it that told me? Two girls are sitting on a bench. One of them takes an umbrella and traces in the sand: i---t. 'Guess what it is,' she says; 'I wrote it about you.' Of course, the admirer looks at it and reads 'idiot.' And tragedy... But the word was 'igoist.'"

Marusya had to laugh. Once again: the spellbound load, the longshoremen straining with all their might... She bit her lips; Andrei Ivanych blanched...

Finally she began to laugh...thank God, she began to laugh! But at that very second her laughter shattered; its fragments rolled down and clattered; tears gushed out in three rivulets.

"Schmidt, dear! I can't bear it any longer, I can't, forgive me. Schmidt, I'll tell you everything... After all, Schmidt, you'll understand, you must understand! Otherwise — what will happen?"

She wrung her small childish hands together and drew her whole self up to Schmidt; but she didn't dare touch him: after all, she...

Schmidt turned to Andrei Ivanych, to his distorted face, but saw in it no surprise. Schmidt narrowed his eyes; they became mere slits.

"You... You already know? Why do you know before I do?"

Andrei Ivanych winced; a lump formed in his throat. With vexation he threw up his hands.

"Never mind, we'll settle our account later! Take a good look at her: you should be bowing at her feet."

Schmidt ground out the words through clenched teeth:

"Mu-si-cian! I know these mu-si..."

But he heard a faint rustle behind him. He turned around, and Marusya, who had been standing, was now sitting on the ground, her legs crossed, her eyes closed.

Schmidt took her in his arms and carried her away.

14. A Snowy Design

Every evening Andrei Ivanych went up to the Schmidts' gate, reached for the bell, and then walked away: he couldn't, damn it, he just could not go in to see Marusya. Damn it to hell! Why hadn't he killed the general that night? Schmidt would have.

So as it was, he had to just sit in his hateful room and not know what was happening over there — he could do no more.

("Oh God, if there were only some way of seeing, even just a little, how she's doing, what's going on...")

And on the evening of the fifth day, Andrei Ivanych did

come up with a plan: He got into his coat and reached for his saber — then he put it back in the corner.

"Where are you headed this time of night?" asked Guslyaikin with what struck Andrei Ivanych as a wink.

"I...I won't be back for a while. Don't wait up."

The street was covered with snow that had fallen the day before. Not a real snow, of course, not a Russian one: just a few measly flakes.

("Snow — that isn't good, it crunches, and with the moon it's as bright as day... Never mind. It has to be done...")

Andrei Ivanych's teeth chattered — from the cold, maybe? Not likely: cold weather's no problem.

The Schmidts' windows were covered over with a glittering, frosty design. Andrei Ivanych stood on tiptoe and started patiently warming the glass with his breath so that he might see — God, if only he could see just a little, just a little!

Now he could see: they were in their dining room. The door leading from it was slightly ajar. The parlor was filled with blue twilight; sharp, indistinct shadows from the palm lay on the couch, on the floor.

Shivering, Andrei Ivanych peered through the melted circle. His hands and feet were frozen. In a while, perhaps after half an hour, perhaps after an hour, a thought crossed his mind:

("To stand here like a Peeping Tom, like some sort of Agniya! There's no reason, clearly I... I've got to leave...")

He stepped back — and stood: he lacked the strength to go any farther. Suddenly he caught a glimpse of something: on the window's snowy screen, two shadows had begun to sway — one large, one a little smaller. He forgot everything and plunged toward the window, shaking uncontrollably like someone in the grip of a fever.

The thawed patch was already covered with a snowy film;

he couldn't make out a thing...

("What's going on...what are they doing in there, what are they doing?")

The small shadow shrank still more, got down on its knees, or maybe it fell, or maybe... The large shadow bent toward it...

Transfixed, Andrei Ivanych pressed with all his being against that accursed snow veil, struggling to pierce it...

Crash! — the glass shattered; burning pain on his forehead, something wet. Blood... Recoiling, Andrei Ivanych looked crazily at the fragments near his feet. He stood and stared, as if rooted to the spot: it never crossed his mind to run.

He regained his senses; beside him stood Schmidt.

"Aha, so it's you, mu-si-cian? Spying, eh?"

Just a few feet away, Andrei Ivanych saw Schmidt's sharp, savage eyes.

"Not bad! You've adapted to this place very quickly."

("Should I let him have it? Hit him? No, after all, it's true, it's true...") — Andrei Ivanych began to moan. And he stood there. And he was silent.

"This time... Get out of here!"

Schmidt slammed the gate behind him.

("Now, right now! I'll come back — and put a bullet in his head... Right now!") Andrei Ivanych ran home. His face burned as if he'd been slapped.

Afterward, he couldn't say whether Guslyaikin had opened the door or not. Probably not. In any case, Andrei Ivanych found himself sitting at the table, looking at his pistol as it glistened so repulsively in the lamplight.

("But absolutely no one saw. And that's not even the point. The main thing is that Marusya will be left alone — alone with him. After all, he might beat her, and if I'm not there...")

He put away the pistol and hastily locked it up. He blew out the lamp, and without undressing — still wearing his boots — he flopped down on the bed, his teeth clenched: ("Oh damn, you damn coward!")

...A slimy, foggy-gray morning. Guslyaikin was mercilessly shaking Andrei Ivanych to wake him up:

"Yer honor, they've brought your packages from the city."

"What, what are you talking about? What packages?"

"Well, yer honor, it was you yerself that ordered 'em sometime last week. After all, tomorrow's Christmas!"

Momentarily healed by sleep, his thoughts woke up and began to ache.

("Christmas... My favorite holiday. Bright lights, a ball, someone's perfumed handkerchief, stolen and kept under your pillow... All that had been, all that was finished, and now...")

It was like this: he had sunk to the bottom; on the bottom he sat. And above his head surged a turbid, heavy lake. And there on the bottom, everything happening up above sounded muffled, muted, hazy.

Andrei Ivanych found it very strange that first day to put on his uniform and go visiting. Nevertheless, impelled by some kind of winding mechanism, he set off. He greeted everyone, kissed hands, and even laughed. But he heard the sound of his own laughter.

Somewhere — maybe at the Nesterovs', maybe at Ivanenkos', maybe at the Kosinskis' — there was a squabble about suckling pig: how should it be served? Decorated with a paper fringe, or not? It's essential for a ham, of course — everyone knows that — but what about a suckling pig? And when the squabblers asked Andrei Ivanych for his opinion ("After all, you were in Russia not long ago — that's very important") — he started laughing, and he heard himself say, "I'm laughing, me?"

In one of the houses, apparently Nechesa's, he looked through the open dining-room doors and saw, side by side, two big-bellied conjugal beds. And putting away either his fifth or his tenth glass of wine, Andrei Ivanych unexpectedly asked:

"What's going on at the Schmidts'?"

"You're a strange one; after all, you have such a treasure in Guslyaikin. Go ask him; he spends day and night in the Schmidts' kitchen," advised the captain's round wife.

The cognac, the vodka, the oppressive slab of the night made the turbid lake still deeper, still heavier.

Home after the visits, Andrei Ivanych was sitting at his own table looking distractedly at the lamp, not listening to what Guslyaikin was telling him from the doorway. Then it came back to him: a treasure... Andrei Ivanych blazed up and, without looking at Guslyaikin, asked:

"Have you been at Captain Schmidt's lately?"

"I was there today. Certainly was such goings on, such goings on, o-o-o-o... What a comedy!"

It was impossible for Andrei Ivanych to listen — and even more impossible for him not to listen. Burning with shame — he listened. And he said:

"What else? Well, and then what?"

And when Guslyaikin had finished, Andrei Ivanych walked up to him, staggering.

"How dare you say such...such things, how dare you?"

"But yer honor, it was you who..."

"...How dare you...about her, about her, you swine!"

Plop! — Andrei Ivanych's hand landed in some sort of jelly, a *blancmange:* such were Guslyaikin's soggy cheeks. How repulsive: it was as if he had dirtied his whole hand.

15. The Evil Spirit

The 25th of January, commemorating the death of St. Felitsata, was the nameday of the general's wife, Felitsata Afrikanovna. And in keeping with the long-established custom, General Azancheev was throwing a fancy dinner party for Felitsata. And not just any old dinner, not just any old party: there was always a catch, some sort of intricate trick involved. Once, just before dinner, the general had presented all the officers' wives with a bouquet of roses: "Please, dear ladies, I grew them for you myself in the greenhouse. I even picked them myself." Of course, the ladies were overcome with gratitude: "Ah, how kind you are, *merci,* what a scent..." They sniffed once or twice, then they all started sneezing: the roses had been sprinkled with snuff! And then at the most recent dinner — it must have been last year — what fun that was! The general himself whipped up the dinner — it was out of this world! Singled out as really exceptional was the bouillon. And it was true — islets of transparent fat were floating on the surface; it was an amber color, like champagne; and it was sprinkled with Chinese noodles: dragons, stars, fish and little people. After dinner the guests lacked the strength even to walk: the general took them out for a ride, promising to show them a great wonder of some kind. And when they had gone about five versts, the general shouted the command "Halt!" and then announced to all his loyal subjects:

"Gentlemen, that wasn't fat floating around on top of the bouillon today: it was castor oil. And no one suspected a thing — ha ha ha."

Well...the less said about that, the better!

There was no question but that something similar would happen this year, too. Although the general had hightailed

it to the city to get away from Schmidt, and although he was still lying low there, it was inconceivable that he wouldn't return for Felitsata's Day. After all, Captain Nechesa, standing in as senior officer for the perpetually-on-leave commander, had received the general's order to round up all the soldiers and get to work: leveling a field. All of these activities, of course, got the men out of target practice on the rifle range: such kindness was not an everyday occurrence, but then Felitsata's nameday took place only once a year.

And the soldiers fanned out all over the field behind the powder magazine — just like gray ants. They were in luck, thank heaven; the fog had lifted and warm weather had set in — otherwise they couldn't have made a dent in the ground. It was a bit gooey, though. The clay splattered and smeared, sticking to everything, and all the soldiers looked like bums. Well, this was still nothing to write home about: a job. And they dug and they kept digging; they hauled wheelbarrows; gray, submissive, bent over double, they swarmed all over the place. There would either be a track meet or something else: right up to Felitsata's Day, not one living soul could guess the general's secret...

Off to the side, perched on a stump, sat Tikhmen, with his back to the proceedings: he was supervising the work. It all struck him as vile: the grimy soldiers wallowing in the mud, with their submissive "anything you say sir," and the fog — a crawling reptile — and, worst of all, Tikhmen himself.

Indeed: some snot-nosed Petyashka comes along and suddenly everything goes straight to hell. Everything used to be so clear: there were the "things in themselves," for which Tikhmen had no use whatsoever, and then there were the "reflections of things" in Tikhmen — things submissive and subservient to him. And now — what a fine

kettle of fish! An evil spirit has simply moved right in, good God!

...A church, a sunbeam. Some grown-up is taking Tikhmen by the hand and leading him away. But he's resisting — he wants to hear more. He's yelling like a hysterical woman. It's strange and awful: he's yelling in his own, woman's voice and, at the same time, in another voice — a dog's.

("But isn't all this fit only for dogs? This rotten trick, love itself, and that mangy pup, Petyashka?")

But the dog voice — the evil spirit — whimpered inside Tikhmen:

("Petyashka... Ah, how can I find out? How can I know for sure? Who actually is Petyashka's father?")

"Hello, Tikhmen. What are you day-dreaming about?"

Both Tikhmens flinched — the real Tikhmen and the dog Tikhmen. They merged into one and that one jumped up.

There in front of Tikhmen, sitting in the cab of the company's cabriolet, was Captain Nechesa's wife. Today she had gotten out of bed for the first time and for her first expedition she was calling on the general's wife — or, strictly speaking, on Agniya. She was all atwitter to find out in meticulous detail what had gone on between the general and that Maruska Schmidt. ("Ah, thank heavens, the Lord had punished her for her pride — such a princess on a pea...")

The captain's wife gossiped a bit, flaunted her dimples and then drove away. And at once the stump was reoccupied by the two Tikhmens, who promptly began to shove and bicker.

Dog Tikhmen said:

"And now Captain Nechesa is home all alone, so..."

And thus endowed with a dog's sense of smell, he found

a path invisible to a man. He began to run — he twisted and turned; he scoured the woods; he wandered hither and yon, and suddenly — stop. There it was; he had sniffed it out:

"An idiot, that's what I am, an idiot! Of course: I should go ask the captain himself. He must know who Petyashka's father is... How could he help but know?"

Tikhmen stook up and beckoned to Arzhanoi with his finger.

"Well, how are things going?"

Standing in formation, Arzhanoi just gawks; but here, working the land, he's a real pro, a whiz, and he answers for everyone.

"It's like this, yer honor, most everbuddy's finished them jobs. Mebbe ten men or thereabouts is still at it..."

"Ten men, you say? Well, all right."

Tikhmen threw up his hands: "Finish up without me, I'm leaving. You look after everything, Arzhanoi."

Tikhmen hurriedly ran into the captain's dining room. Thank God it was all right; the captain was home.

A soldier was standing in front of the captain. Captain Nechesa was rather pretentiously doling out some sort of powder. He added a bit more and sized up the amount in his palm: it would do.

"Here you go; drink it in good health. Well, go ahead, go ahead!"

Nechesa saw himself as a pretty fine physician. What's more, the soldiers preferred to take their chances with him than with the doctor's assistant, or even the doctor, each of whom had a screw loose, to put it mildly.

One misfortune: about five years ago, one of Nechesa's patients had made off with *The School of Health,* and left the captain with only *Home Remedies for Livestock.* There was nothing to be done: he had to make do with livestock rem-

edies. And by God, the men were none the worse for it! Come on now, is there really much of a difference? The mechanism's the same, whether it's a man or a cow.

The captain's mood was always marvelous after a medical session. He tickled Tikhmen in the ribs:

"What's new, brother Pushkin?"

"Well, I wanted... I was about to ask..."

"No, brother, first you must sit down and have a drink. And then — we'll see."

They sat down. They had a drink and a bite to eat. Once again Tikhmen screwed up his courage; he began with an indirect approach: "Seeing as how, and since," he said "it was going to be hard to get Petyashka up on his feet..." But the captain quickly cut Tikhmen short:

"At the table? Such lofty matters? You've gone stark raving mad! One can see you don't understand a damn thing about medicine. How could you! These conversations make the blood go to the head, when it's all got to get down to the stomach..."

Ah, good Lord! What can you do? And to make matters worse, just then all eight of the captain's ragamuffins flew in, accompanied by Bruin on his hind paws — the orderly Yashka Lomailov.

The little Nechesas giggled and whispered — they were up to something. Snorting, the oldest daughter, Varyushka, then flew up to Tikhmen. .

"Uncle, uncle, do you have a liver? Huh?"

"A liv...liver," the captain roared with laughter.

Tikhmen knit his brow.

"Well, yes, I have one, but why do you ask?"

"We had fried liver for dinner today, for dinner we had..."

"For dinner we had...for dinner we had..." the little demons began to jump, clap and yell as they spun around

in a circle. The captain couldn't resist: he jumped up and started whirling around with them — it didn't matter whose they were: the captain's, the-aide-de-camp's, Molochko's...

Then they all played a game of hide-and-seek. Then they rounded up some medicines: the captain and the little demons were doctors; Yashka Lomailov was the assistant; and Tikhmen — the patient... And then it was time for bed.

So Tikhmen was still in the dark: he had gotten nowhere.

16. The Spring

On purpose, just for a laugh, Molochko spread the rumor that the general had returned from the city. And Schmidt fell for it. He instantly began to seethe: I'm going!

He stood in front of the mirror and gloomily twirled his starched collar around and around in his hand. He set it down on the dressing table and called Marusya.

"Please, take a look at it: is it presentable? Can I still wear it? I don't have any others. After all, we don't have anything anymore."

Slender — even more so than before — and with two deathly wrinkles at the corners of her mouth, Marusya approached.

"Let me see it. Yes, it...yes, it's still all right..."

And still turning he collar in her hand, not taking her eyes off it, she said softly:

"Oh, if only I could stop living. Let me die...let me, Schmidt!"

Yes, it was she, Marusya: a gossamer — and death, a collar — and "let me die..."

"Die?" Schmidt grinned. "It's never hard to die. The trick is — to kill..."

He quickly finished dressing and left the house. He walked on the frozen, resonant earth — but he didn't feel it: all the veins inside him were as taut as steel strings. His step was quick and sharp, hard with fury.

The hatefully familiar door, covered with yellow oilcloth. The general's hatefully shiny orderly, Larka.

"His excellency didn't plan to, and didn't come, God's truth. Or strike me dead!"

Schmidt stood there taut, ready to spring, ready to use the thing in his pocket.

"If you don't believe me, yer honor, then take a look yerself..."

And stepping to one side, Larka opened the door wide.

("If he's opened it, that means it's true, he's not here... Should I break in and make a fool of myself again?")

Schmidt turned around so sharply on the threshold that Larka jumped back and narrowed his eyes.

Schmidt clenched his teeth, clenched the handle of his pistol, squeezed his whole being into an evil spring. It demanded release, a target! He ran to the barracks — for what reason, he himself didn't know.

He entered the barracks, with its spick-and-span timbered walls. Everyone was out behind the powder magazine, where some sort of surprise was being arranged for Felitsata's nameday celebration. The one man on barracks duty was sleepily lounging around — a gray soldier. Everything about him was gray: his eyes, his hair, and his face — it all matched his uniform.

Schmidt ran along the timbered wall; the bleak plank beds flashed in his eyes. Something brushed against his epaulet; he glanced up at the wall: there, swinging from a nail, was a chart showing the proper way to salute.

Schmidt tore the chart down.

"Wh-at is this? You dare..."

His voice struck the word "wh-at" so forcefully, so forcefully did he release in this word his tormenting spring that this simple "what" must have sounded terrifying: the gray soldier recoiled as if from a blow.

But Schmidt was already far away: this gray dimwit wouldn't do. Schmidt ran to where the work was going on — to the powder magazine, where there were lots of people.

Only three men hadn't been driven out to work that day: the man on barracks duty, the man guarding the powder magazine — and a man painting some cartridge cases.

But the man painting the cases was no chowderhead — the type who doesn't even know enough to use a primer. Painting the cases was none other than Private Muravei, an acknowledged master of his trade. And that wasn't the half of it: two years before, they had actually staged a production of *Tsar Maximian and His Unruly Son Adolph* and Private Muravei had actually painted all the sets. Besides that, Muravei was the number one accordion expert: no one could tug at the heartstrings the way he could. Private Muravei knew his own worth.

And there he stood, small, dark-haired, looking as if he weren't even Russian; there he stood, gratifying his soul. It was no trick to paint the boxes green — he could do that by and by. But in the meantime, he was using some green paint and white primer to paint a scene on one of the boxes: a river — to be more precise their very own real-life river, the Mamura — and over the river hung some white willows and over the wil...

"A-ah!" Schmidt's hand struck him from above like a bolt of lightning. "You're painting." "You're...painting?" "What... were...my...orders?"

And Schmidt shouted something else — maybe not even words — in fact, definitely not words. He kept shouting and beating Muravei, who slumped against the ammunition wagon. He beat him — and wanted to keep on beating him — until he bled, until he moaned, until he rolled his eyes. It was just as irrepressible as his earlier desire to take the slender Marusya in his arms and kiss her endlessly.

Whether it was from fright, or because Muravei saw himself as a hardened criminal, he didn't cry out. But Schmidt took his silence for stubbornness. He had to conquer, he needed...he needed... Schmidt was panting — he needed a shriek, a moan.

Schmidt took the pistol out of his pocket — and only then did Muravei start shrieking at the top of his lungs.

His shrieks carried to the field behind the powder magazine. Swinging their arms and jumping across ditches, black figures dashed to the spot. And in the lead was Andrei Ivanych. Today he was on duty with the soldiers.

Schmidt looked at Andrei Ivanych: he wanted to tell him something. But the soldiers were coming close, breathing hard, winded from their run. Schmidt threw up his hands and slowly walked off.

Craning their necks, the soldiers stood in a circle around the man lying on the ground. For a long time no one dared approach.

Then out of the circle stepped a burly, awkwardly stolid soldier. Wheezing, he got down on all fours next to Muravei.

"Hey buddy; ya knows, that was quite a workin' over he gave ya!"

Andrei Ivanych recognized Arzhanoi. Arzhanoi raised up Muravei's head slightly, and skillfully, as though he had done this before, wrapped it with a cotton handkerchief.

("Yes, that's Arzhanoi, the same one who killed the

Chink. He's the one, all right...") — And Andrei Ivanych fell to thinking.

17. The Lancepoop Club

By this time, it was common knowledge that Schmidt was running amok. So when he all of a sudden walked into the commissary of the Officer's Club, everyone, as if on command, shut up and sat down — even though they were all tipsy.

"Well, what's the matter, gentlemen? What's going on here?" Schmidt leaned against the table with a heavy grin.

Everyone was sitting, but he stood: it was the most awkward situation imaginable. The men fidgeted. Then someone couldn't stand it and jumped up:

"We...we were telling a joke..."

"What joke?"

What joke? As luck would have it, their minds went completely blank. ("But he'll guess right off that we were talking about him and...")

Captain Nechesa came to the rescue. He picked at his bluish nose a few times and said:

"We...it was, yes, an Armenian joke — do you know it? One arrives, another arrives...a twelfth arrives. What is it?"

Schmidt almost smiled:

"Hmmm, a twelfth arrives? That would have to be Captain Nechesa's children..."

They all picked up on it and began to chortle with relief: ("What do you know, there's nothing wrong with him. He's even making jokes...")

Schmidt surveyed them all with his sharp, iron gray eyes;

he scrutinized each person in turn and said:

"Gentlemen, aren't you sick of this dump? Isn't it time for something a little snappier? Right? Why don't we head into town, to the Lancepoop Club, for example. After all, it's been nearly a year since we were there."

Schmidt watched, scanned their faces: ("Will they go or not? But suppose they do go, and we run into Aza...Azancheev? Suddenly we meet him — it's certainly possible...")

The crowd hemmed and hawed.

"Now? But it's almost midnight already... It would be crazy: it would take us all night to get there... The wind...it's going to be choppy..."

"So? What will it be?" Schmidt lashed Andrei Ivanych with his grin; he stared intently at the broad Andrei-Ivanych forehead.

Although Andrei Ivanych hadn't the faintest idea what this Lancepoop Club was, he stepped forward and obstinately said:

"I'm going."

That got the ball rolling. The men began to sound off: me too, me too! Scurrying every which way, they buttoned up their overcoats and headed for the shore. Only Nechesa stayed behind.

It was so cold on the water that everyone promptly lost all interest in chitchat. The wind whistled with a terrifying whine. The men dozed sitting up. All night long, a wave relentlessly beat its head against the steel side of the boat.

They approached land at sunrise. Slowly, disdainfully, majestically, the sun rolled out of the water. Now it was disgraceful to be dozing, so the men jumped up and gazed at the rosy-blue city still asleep on the hill.

On the dock they roused the Chinese cabdrivers, hired five decrepit carts and headed single-file for the outermost edge of the city.

At the sound of the bell, the door opened by itself, as if in the palace of Kashchei: there was no one in sight. Whispering, the men stealthily entered the room that had been made ready for them. It had an unusual shape — very long: a corridor, not a room. Against one wall stood a narrow table covered with bottles. And across from that, where the windows were — nothing: empty, blank.

Schmidt poured himself a full glass of rum and drank it. His hand was shaking slightly; his eyes narrowed and flashed.

"So, what will it be gentlemen, lots?"

They cast lots. Four men were chosen: Schmidt, Molochko, Tikhmen and Nesterov. For some reason Molochko's rosiness instantly faded.

"Here it goes," Schmidt shouted as he tossed a large, gaily sparkling gold coin out the window.

The blind on the open window, drawn shut, billowed like a sail. The men stood at the window in pairs — to the right and to the left. They drew their pistols, stood perfectly erect — and waited. Schmidt's harsh, forged profile, the sharp, thrust-forward chin, the closed eyes...

("But why are they...") — Andrei Ivanych was about to raise his head: he didn't understand a thing.

They shushed him: he fell silent. Everyone's eyes were red and wild; everyone's face had a greenish hue: perhaps from the sleepless night. Nonsensical fragments of words swirled around in their heads. They downed glass after glass. Each heart was caught in an unbearable, sweetly tormenting vice.

A square of sunlight floated upward along the white curtain. Everyone continued to sit silently. No one could say if an hour had passed, or two, or...

Steps on the sidewalk below the window. The same kind of spasm seized them all — then, in quick succession, four

separate shots.

Jumping up, the men began to babble excitedly and they rushed pellmell to the window. Right next to the wall, lying on his back in a blue quilted jacket, was a Chink: evidently he had stooped down to pick up that brand-new gold coin, but he had, it seems, not been successful.

Andrei Ivanych didn't see what happened afterward. Whether it was from the sleepless night, from the intoxicating wine, or from something else altogether, he simply keeled over: one minute he was standing by the window; the next thing he knew, he was sitting on the floor.

He regained his senses — directly above him were Schmidt's iron-gray eyes.

"Now I've seen everything!" Schmidt got up off his knees and stood erect. "An officer — and such a sissy that he can't stand the sight of blood! I always say it's in peacetime that an officer has to master the art of killing..."

Andrei Ivanych rose slowly from the floor, staggered, grabbed for Tikhmen.

Tikhmen took him by the hand and led him to the door.

"Come along, my friend, come along. It's still too soon for you...wait a while..."

They went out into a small, bare garden with a darkened fence and sadly barren soil. The sun had just a little while before come into the sky, and already its visage was obscured by a deadly film of fog.

Tikhmen threw down his cap, ran his hand over his receding hairline, and looked up:

"It's foul. It's all foul. Terribly foul!" he said in his rasping voice. He threw up his hands and once again sat quietly; he was too tall, too spindly. The rusty, rusting, yellow fog crawled on. .

"If we'd only have some kind of war, perhaps..." Tikhmen muttered through his nose.

"We'd be great at war!"

Whether he only meant to say it, or whether he actually said it, even Andrei Ivanych himself didn't know: his head was pounding; everything was falling to pieces; confusion reigned.

18. The Alliance

Lent began — the weather turned damp and warm. Mud sloshed underfoot — sloshed so much that it threatened to swallow a man.

And it did so. Already lacking the strength to crawl, a sleepy man sinks down, and dropping off to sleep, implores: "Oh, let there be a war...or a fire...or at least some heavy drinking..."

The mud sloshed. Good-for-nothing people wandered aimlessly along the spit which extended out to sea. Far off in the black distance were etched tiny white shapes — ships. Ah, won't any of them put in here? From Lent on, they always drop anchor here. Just last year, two of them showed up in February — come on, my dear, come on... No! Well, then, maybe tomorrow.

And tomorrow arrived. Like a bolt from the blue — a welcome bolt — some Frenchmen descended on them.

At that hour, Molochko and Tikhmen were sitting on the dock reminiscing about the Lancepoop Club and gazing off into the distance. First a distant puff of smoke. It got closer, it came faster — and then there it was, completely visible: the French flag and a cruiser as white and elegant as a swan. Tikhmen got nervous and took off like a shot. But Molochko stayed, prancing around and kicking up his

heels: he would be the first to find out everything, the first to meet them, the first to tell about it!

"I am happy that I was accidentally given the opportunity to welcome you to this distant, though Russian...that is, to this Russian, though distant, land..."

This was how Molochko expressed himself: he put his best foot forward — it was fortunate indeed that he had had a French governess...

The French lieutenant, to whom Molochko's speech had been delivered, didn't smile — he restrained himself and, with a bow, he replied:

"Our admiral requests permission to inspect your battery and post."

"Good heavens, well, I... I'll run, I'll be — right back..." and Molochko sped away.

But who could come to the rescue? Who could he turn to? None of the commanders was there. The general was in the city and Nechesa was still the senior man in charge. But Nechesa gibbered like an idiot when awakened from his siesta. What a mess!

"Captain Nechesa, Captain... Get up, a French admiral has arrived. He wants to inspect the post..."

"Grr...oof...grr... Who?"

"An admiral, I tell you, French!"

"To hell with the admiral. I want to sleep. Grr...oof..."

Molochko pulled off the Chinese dressing gown that was draped over the captain. He shouted for Lomailov:

"Lomailov, some *kvas* for the captain!"

But there was no sign of Lomailov: today Lomailov was busy cleaning chimneys. So the *kvas* was brought in by none other than the captain's wife, Katyusha.

The captain took a few sips; he was beginning to make out some of the words:

"Fre-enchmen? What's with them, are they crazy? What

are they doing here?"

"Hurry, captain, for God's sake! After all, we have an Alliance with the French... My God, I'm sure to get it!"

"Good lord, where are they from? Why? The soldiers — think of what the soldiers look like after doing the general's work! Molochko, get over to the powder magazine, right this second. Drive all those bastards into the woods. I don't want even one son-of-a-bitch to show his face!"

And so Captain Nechesa was finally standing on the dock, his overcoat open, his dress uniform covered with regalia. The main link in the chain was Molochko: he mingled, scintillated, translated. The French admiral was not in his first youth, but he was as neat and trim as if he wore a corset. He pulled out a notebook, examined everything with great curiosity and took notes.

"And what kind of rations do the soldiers get? I see. And the horses? How many companies? And how many gun crews? Ah, yes!"

Then the whole crowd descended on the barracks. There the men had already managed to spruce things up: not bad at all. However, a certain aroma, extremely Russian, lingered on. The Frenchmen scrambled out into the fresh air.

"Well, all that's left now is the powder magazine — and that's it, thank God."

And they were only a block from the powder magazine when Lomailov popped out of Lt. Nesterov's house. He had finished cleaning the chimneys; he had done an extremely thorough job both in the parlor and in the bedroom.

Having finished, he was now homeward bound with his broom. He was in rags — a shaggy, black monstrosity.

With curiosity, the admiral peered through his pince-nez.

"A-a...and who might that be?" he turned to Molochko for the answer.

Shrinking, Molochko looked imploringly at Nechesa; Nechesa rolled his eyes wildly and helplessly.

"That's a...that's a Lancepoop, your excellency!" Molochko blurted out; he had blurted the first thing that crossed his mind. Earlier, he and Tikhmen had been talking about the Lancepoops, and...

"Lan-ce-poupe? What... What does that mean?"

"It's...one of the indigenous tribes, your excellency."

The admiral became intrigued:

"You don't say! This is the first time I've heard of such a tribe and I'm very interested in ethnography."

"They were just recently discovered, your excellency!"

The admiral wrote in his notebook:

"Lan-ce-poupe... Very interesting, very. I'll make a report to the Geographical Society. Without fail..."

Meanwhile, Nechesa was dying to know the gist of this strange conversation — about the Lancepoops. But as for the admiral — things weren't getting any easier — he had already thrown another curve at Molochko:

"But...why don't I see your soldiers, not even one?"

"They, your excellency, they're in...in the woods."

"In the woods? All of them? Hmmm, what for?"

"It's them, your excellency, these very same Lance-La-Lancepoops... You see, they've all been sent out, our soldiers, that is, to subdue the Lancepoops..."

"Ah, I see, so they're a tribe that hasn't been completely subjugated? Well, you've shown me surprises here every step of the way!"

("Surprises! And what surprises can I still expect from you? I'm entangled in lies, confusion; it's going to be my undoing...") — the desperate Molochko had already broken out in a cold sweat.

But the admiral was content with these discoveries. Now he walked along, occasionally nodding his head: "Good,

very good, very interesting." After all, this was not an everyday occurrence — the discovery of a new tribe.

19. The Martyrs

And where did a dimwit like Captain Nechesa get all his energy? Evidently from the sheer delight that everything had unexpectedly gone so well with the French. In any case, Nechesa undertook the organization of a sumptuous feast in their honor.

The French agreed: they had no choice (the Alliance, you know). Everyone was all agog. The officers' apartments smelled of benzine; the orderlies had dropped everything — they were too busy winding curl papers for the officers' wives. The general's Larka delivered the invitations.

Marusya saw through the window that it was Larka knocking at their gate — right away she flushed, got flustered, and began rushing frantically about. In her mind's eye, she saw that cursed evening: the twilight madness, the seven crosses, herself with Andrei Ivanych, and Larka handing over the general's letter...

"Schmidt, don't let him in; Schmidt, don't let him in, you mustn't!"

The spring tightened inside Schmidt. It began to throb and ache; it inflicted torments.

Schmidt grinned:

"You should have thought of that before. It's too late now." He purposefully opened the dining-room door and shouted into the kitchen:

"Hey, who's there? Come on in!"

Schmidt still couldn't bring himself to say Larka's name.

Larka chugged in, copper-shiny, handed him the invitation and said:

"So much fuss, so much fuss over these French. What a nuisance!"

Schmidt forced himself to ask some questions; he even squeezed out a smile. And Larka suddenly screwed up his courage:

"But tell me, your honor, if I may be so bold as to ask: do the French take vodka, or what? And if they don't — well, what can we do with 'em?"

And Schmidt even started laughing. His laughter rang out, rising higher and higher, ringing out in the highest register. He couldn't make it come down...

As for Marusya — she stood at the window with her back to Larka: she didn't dare walk away. She stood there, her thin little shoulders trembling. Schmidt saw her — and couldn't stop his laughter. It rang out still higher, still higher...

They were alone. She threw herself at Schmidt's feet, onto the cold floor in front of him, and stretched out her hands:

"Schmidt, it was only for you... I did it for you. It was horribly repulsive for me — don't you believe me?"

Schmidt mustered a convulsive smile:

"And I'll tell you for the hundredth time: it wasn't loathsome enough, it wasn't repulsive enough. In other words, your pity for me was stronger than your love."

Marusya didn't know how to make him... Tightly clenched fingers... God, what could be done with her love and his reasoning; and there was nothing you could say, nothing you could think up. But did he really believe what he said? Ah, there's no understanding it! He had shackled himself; he had locked himself up; he wasn't himself — he wasn't Schmidt...

Marusya got up from the cold floor and quietly went into the parlor. The dark corners tormented and frightened her. But not in the same way as they had before, in her childhood. She was haunted not by the shaggy Boogeyman, and not by the Half-Spirit, the merry lunatic, and not by the Fiend, the leaping evil one — no, she was haunted by the alien, incomprehensible face of Captain Schmidt.

She lit a lamp on the table; she climbed up on a chair and lit a wall lamp. But it only reminded her even more of that night: then, too, she had walked alone and lit all the lamps.

She put them out and walked to the bedroom. ("All of Schmidt's socks have holes, and for a whole month now, I've intended... I mustn't let myself go; I can't let myself go.")

She sat down, leaned forward and darned socks. She wiped her eyes impatiently: they kept running; the light was bad;, she could barely see her work. It was late, after midnight, when she finished all the darning. She opened a drawer and put away the socks. A candle flickered on the dresser.

Schmidt came in. Heavy, tall, he paced back and forth through the bedroom; the floor creaked. The same inner spring kept throbbing — tormenting him and seeking torments. He stopped and said... No, it wasn't said — it was thrown at Marusya like a rock:

"Time for bed."

She undressed, humble, small. In her nightgown she was just like a little child: so delicate, such slender hands. Only these two old-womanish wrinkles at the corners of her mouth...

Schmidt approached, breathing like a winded animal. Marusya, lying down with closed eyes, said:

"But Schmidt...Schmidt...you love me, don't you? Is this

really what you want — not this way, not simply like..."

"Love? I loved..."

Schmidt panted. ("Marusenka, Marusenka, I'm dying. Marusenka, dearest, save me!") But aloud he said:

"But after all, you keep insisting that you love me, hmmm! Well, that's enough out of you. But as for me, I only want..."

("No, he's just saying it, he's only pretending... It would be horrible...")

"Schmidt don't, don't, for the sake of...for the sake of..."

But could she really get the better of Schmidt? He trampled her, bound her and took her by force. It was agonizing, deathly-sweet to tear her to pieces, this dear, slender, little child — so pure, so guilty, so loved...

This was so degrading, so painful to Marusya that her final, most desperate cry never broke from her lips, but sank to the depths of her being, smothered, pierced by the savage pain. And for an instant, for one second, distant lightning flashed: for that second she understood Schmidt's great wrath, the sister of his great...

But Schmidt was already leaving. He went to the living room — to sleep there. And maybe not to sleep, but to pace the floor all night long and look out the blue, owl-eyed windows.

Marusya lay there alone, in the darkness, shuddering all over. The pillow was soaked with tears; she had to turn it over.

("He said I was a great woman.") — she remembered Andrei Ivanych. ("Great indeed! Look at me: pathetic, shameful. If he knew everything, he wouldn't have said...")

How could he know?

20. A Sumptuous Feast

Music: five buglers plus Private Muravei on the accordion. Well, maybe the music was a bit sloppy, but otherwise everything was just grand. Green branches hung from the walls, little flags fluttered everywhere, and the lamps smoked for all they were worth. Silver gleamed on the officers' scarfs; cherished brooches, bracelets and bangles jangled as the ladies dashed about. And wasn't the best thing of all the rosily-glowing master of ceremonies — Molochko?

But Tikhmen was still completely sober and consequently looked at everything with great skepticism:

("All of this, of course, is a lie. However, it does glitter. But since the only real truth is death and since I am still alive, then I must be living a lie, superficially... It follows, then, that the Molochkos of this world are right and one must be empty-headed... But in practice? Ah, I'm not getting it quite right today...")

At that point, Molochko made a mad dash past Tikhmen to the musicians:

"Strike up the flourish, the flourish! 'The Double-Headed Eagle!' They're coming, they're coming..."

Without further ado, the band went into action; the ladies stood on tiptoe. The Frenchmen made their entrance — trim, well-scented, and tightly buttoned — nothing short of impeccable.

At first Tikhmen gawked like everybody else. Then he took a close look and got to thinking: look at these Frenchmen — and then look at the Russians. The men's shabby old frock coats and timid faces, the ladies' re-dyed dresses...

("Yes...and so if the lie once again turns out to be false... Let's see: N squared, minus times minus equals plus... In

practice, consequently... Now, what was it? I'm not getting it right, I'm not getting it right...")

"Listen, Polovets, old boy," Tikhmen accosted Andrei Ivanych, "let's go have a little snort: there's something god-awful..."

And Andrei Ivanych could use a drink. They belted down one apiece. In the pantry, meanwhile, Nechesa was guzzling cognac — to keep up his courage. It couldn't be helped; after all, he was in charge; the responsibility was on his shoulders.

"Schmidt's in high spirits today, o-o-o!" mumbled Nechesa through his moist mustache.

"What, is Schmidt really here?" Andrei Ivanych darted back into the parlor.

His heart began to ache with a bitter-sweet torment: it wasn't Schmidt he wanted to see, no...

Frenchmen were sailing by. Wafted by the strains of a waltz, Molochko flashed by, sweaty and red with happiness.

("Nechesa lied — and what for? She's not here. There's no one here...")

And suddenly — the loud, iron ring of Schmidt's laughter. Andrei Ivanych darted in that direction. Couples were whirling and twirling and bumping into each other: it seemed impossible to get through.

Schmidt and Marusya were standing with the French admiral... Schmidt looked right through Andrei Ivanych — through an empty glass, drained of every drop.

Andrei Ivanych's eyes started to fog over. He quickly turned from Schmidt to Marusya. He took her tiny hand and held it...ah, if only he could keep on holding it! ("But why is it shaking, why is her hand shaking so?")

Andrei Ivanych's French left something to be desired, so he listened closely.

"It's a pity the general's not here," Schmidt was saying;

"he's a most amazing man! My wife here is a great admirer of the general. Just look at her: she can't hear his name without getting flustered. I'm positively jealous! One fine day she might even..."

The Frenchmen smiled. Schmidt's voice lashed and rang out. Marusya stood there — like a weeping willow — drooping. And she might have fallen had Andrei Ivanych not sensed that something was wrong — only he had noticed — and supported Marusya by the waist.

"A waltz," he whispered. Not hearing an answer, he whirled her away. ("A little farther from Schmidt — damn him, a little farther... Oh why does he...")

"How he torments me... Andrei Ivanych, if you only knew! These past three days, and today. And for three nights before the ball..."

It seemed to Andrei Ivanych that Marusya had fallen down a well and that her voice was coming from a great depth. He looked: those two deathly wrinkles at the corners of her mouth — oh, those wrinkles!

They sat down. Marusya looked at the oil lamp, her eyes riveted to the evil frenzy of its fiery tongue: if she broke the spell, averted her eyes — she would be done for, the dam would break and out would gush...

Schmidt started toward them as the waltz continued. Smiling — after all, Schmidt was watching them — smiling, Marusya spoke strange, wild words:

"Kill him, kill Schmidt. He'd be better off dead than as he is. I can't..."

"Kill him? Is this you?" Andrei Ivanych looked in disbelief, with horror.

Yes, it was she. A gossamer — and death. A waltz — and murder...

Schmidt was whirling by with Captain Nechesa's round little wife. Harsh and taut, he whirled by; the floor creaked

beneath him. He narrowed his eyes, grinning.

Andrei Ivanych answered Marusya:

"All right."

And with his teeth tightly clenched, he again began to whirl — ah, he would gladly whirl himself to death...

However, if people's heads were still whirling, the cause was to be found not so much in the waltzes, as in the beverages being consumed. After all, it's only once in a blue moon that the French are here — does anyone imagine not drinking a few toasts to the Alliance? It would have been unthinkable!

The Frenchmen drank, too, but they were pretty foxy about it: they drank, but their hearts weren't in it. Why, for the most part, they drank only half a glass — it was awful to watch! But with our boys it was a different story: they drank conscientiously, like real Russians, with no holds barred. One could tell right away that they'd been drinking: they were groggy, cheery and bleary-eyed.

Tikhmen was by now feeling his height: it's terribly awkward to be tall. If a short man staggers — no harm done. But if a tall man — a regular bell tower — totters and comes within a hair of keeling over, it's frightening to watch.

On the other hand, slumped as he was against the wall, Tikhmen felt very steady, strong and bold. Therefore, when Nechesa went lurching by, Tikhmen resolutely seized him by the scruff of his neck. ("Now I've really had enough, now I'll ask him...")

"Cap-tain, tell me truthfully, for God's sake: who is Petyashka's father? I'm in agony, you understand, in agony! I'm dying: is Petyashka mine — or not?"

The captain was completely soused; nevertheless, he understood that something was wrong here — and he asked:

"Hey, you, hey there, old boy, what's all this about, eh?"

"Dear friend, tell me!" Tikhmen quietly and bitterly began to cry. "You're my last hope, oh! oh!" Tikhmen sniveled. "I asked Katyusha, she doesn't know... God, what can I do now? Dear friend, tell me, you must know..."

Nechesa gazed dully at Tikhmen's nose as it swayed right before his eyes; besides having a small teardrop at its very tip, the nose was most illegally tilted to one side — if only he could grab it and fix it.

Drawn by a higher power, Nechesa grabbed Tikhmen's nose firmly between two fingers and began to lead it to the left and to the right. This was such a surprise for Tikhmen that he stopped whimpering and submissively, even with a certain curiosity, watched the captain's hand.

And it was only when he heard the shouts from behind — "Tikhmen, Tikhmen!" — that he understood and jerked himself free. The men had formed a circle and were clutching their stomachs.

Tikhmen surveyed them all with a dumbfounded glance. He stopped when he came to one of them — it was Molochko — and asked:

"You saw? He...he was leading me by the nose?"

They burst out laughing. Molochko could barely utter: "Well, my friend, as to who led whom by the nose, that is, in the final analysis, a good question."

Everyone in the circle stirred. Now Tikhmen had to do something. Reluctantly, to fulfill his duty, Tikhmen jumped the captain.

And what came next was completely absurd: Nechesa lay with his belly on Tikhmen, thrashing him for all he was worth. Someone would try to break up the fight and then someone else would drag away those who were trying to break it up: let them fight it out, they said, don't interfere. And if it hadn't been for Nechesa's wife, God only knows

how the brawl would have ended.

The captain's wife ran up, shouted, stamped her feet:

"You numbskull, fool, get off right now!"

The captain had obeyed that voice for ten years: he instantly got off. Tousled, disheveled and disconcerted — they hadn't been allowed to fight it out — he stood there and tidied his hair.

Meanwhile, the Frenchmen had gathered in the corner, much amazed and wondering whether they should leave. But they couldn't possibly: the Alliance, you know. And staying was awkward: the Russians were apparently having some sort of family quarrel.

("Nevertheless...in a way, they're all Lancepoupes of some sort") — the admiral raised his brows. ("What's this all about?")

They beckoned to Molochko. Molochko endeavored to explain:

"It has to do with a son, your excellency. It's a question of whose son it is..."

"I don't understand at all," said the admiral, shrugging his shoulders.

21. A Light In The Dark

At the Officers' Club a small window had been cut through from the lounge to the corridor. The reason for this, the purpose behind it, was unknown. But this procedure had been followed in all the local houses — so it also had to be followed in the Officers' Club. The orderlies, however, were delighted with the arrangement: they hung around the window and watched to their hearts' content.

"Ooh, these Frenchies know what's what," the general's shiny samovar, Larka, observed. "Ya know, old buddy, they ain't at all like the Japs, or Chinks. These Japs are nothin' but a bunch of runts and..."

Larka didn't finish: in front of Lt. Tikhmen it was necessary to stand at attention.

All rumpled, wet and dusty, Tikhmen stepped into the corridor — and stood there, completely lost: where could he go?

Then it came to him. He turned to the left and started climbing up the rickety steps that led to the watchtower.

Yashka Lomailov watched him go with disapproval:

"And where's he gittin' off to, I ask you, where's he gittin' off? Hmmm, what kind'a pickle's he lookin' to git into there? Oh, Larka, I'll tells ya, ours is a cantankrus bunch of gents. They's each pecular, downright pecular — and each in 'is own way... And ya might ask what else they needs: they got heat, grub..."

Larka snorted:

"You dope! Grub! For the likes of you, jist an animal, grub's enough. But those who're real gentlemen, and not just make-believe ones, well, my friend, they keep a dream inside themselves, and..."

"Suppose I wuz to marry Mr. Tikhmen', wouldn't that be a kick!" Lomailov muttered with his slow tongue. "I'd give him a good half-a-dozen kids, and that'd fix his dreams — like they was blown away in the wind..."

Lomailov peered through the outside window and looked in the direction of the Nechesas' little house. "What's Kostenko up to? Did he get to sleep without me or not?"

Darkness, a cold mist behind the window. Somewhere not very far off, someone was squawking at the top of his lungs: Guard! Guard! The soldiers, tidying themselves and

yawning indifferently, heard the cries: same old thing, happens every day.

Lt. Tikhmen had by now reached the top of the tower, where he stood, unsteady, precarious and tall.

"Well, so be it, so be it. And to hell with you. I'll leave, I'll leave... By the nose, eh? To you it's a big joke, but to me..."

Tikhmen pushed the frame; the window sprang open. Down below, in the darkness, someone was once again shouting "Guard!" — loudly and piteously.

"Guard, eh, guard: And what makes you think I'm not a guard? And what makes you think we don't shout? But who hears, who? So go ahead and shout till you're blue in the face."

But nevertheless Tikhmen leaned out; he stuck his head into the black, wet gullet of the night. From there, from the watchtower, he could make out a small cheerful light in the bay: a cruiser — must be one of theirs.

At that moment the small light in the solid blackness sustained Tikhmen; the light made it possible to live; without the light it would have been impossible. It was a small, cheerful, clear-eyed light.

"Petyashka, my Petyashka, Petyashka..."

And suddenly — the light flickered and vanished. Maybe the cruiser had turned around, or maybe something else had happened.

It had vanished; now an implacable darkness descended.

"Petyashka, my Petyashka! Nechesa was my last... Now no one knows, no one will tell me... Oy-oy-oy!"

Tikhmen shook his head sorrowfully and sobbed. Drunken tears flowed, and what tears are hotter than drunken ones?

He pressed his cheek against the windowsill: the sill was wet, dirty, cold. The coldness on his face sobered him up a

bit. Tikhmen recalled his conversation with someone or other:

"Anyone with children is an idiot, a fool, a sucker who's taken the bait hook, line and sinker... It was I...I said that. And here I am crying about Petyashka. Now I'll never know — whose... Oy-oy-oy!"

Never — the word slammed like a coffin lid on the drunk and bitter Tikhmen. The implacable darkness had prevailed. The light had gone out.

"Petyashka! Pe-tyash-yenka!" Tikhmen sniveled, choked, and slowly crawled out onto the sill.

The sill was incredibly filthy: Tikhmen got his hands all dirty. But it would be a pity to wipe them on his frock coat. Well, somehow or other, he would manage.

He climbed out still farther...ah, there was no end to it: after all, he was so tall. Now that he had crawled all the way out, he leaned over — and plummeted headlong into the darkness.

Maybe he even screamed: the orderlies heard nothing. They had forgotten all about the eccentric Tikhmen: why bother with Tikhmen anyway when the Frenchmen were making their exit? Oh, and what fine lads they were, though awfully puny.

Out came the boisterous Frenchmen, slipping and sliding on the steps — they were feeling no pain: ("Ah, these Russians are funny...real Lancepoupes... But there's something about them, something special about them...")

And right behind the Frenchmen came the Russians. If the French were three sheets to the wind, God only knows the Russians were soaked to the gills: those still able to walk clung for dear life to the railing; the others were ambling along on all fours...

Tikhmen was found only in the morning. They hauled

him over to the Nechesas': he had been with them in life — so with them he would also be in death. He lay there peacefully on a table in the parlor, his face covered with a white handkerchief: it had been pretty thoroughly smashed.

Sobbing violently, the captain's wife, Katyusha, shoved her husband aside:

"Get a-way, get a-way! I love him, I loved him..."

"Dear wife, out of the goodness of your heart, you have loved everyone. Calm down, don't carry on so, that's enough!"

"And to think... Maybe I'm, may-be I'm to blame... Oh heavens, if only I'd known who Petyashka's father really was, if only I'd known...ah! I should have lied to him!"

Lomailov herded the eight children away from the door: they were glued to the door and they stuck their noses in the crack. Oh, how curious these little folk can be!

"Yashka, Yashutnichek, tell us: uncle doesn't hurt, does he? How is uncle? He's just bruised himself, right? But he doesn't hurt?"

"Little fools, he's dead, as it happens: it's quite plain he don't hurt."

The oldest daughter, Varyushka, began to jump up and down with joy:

"Foo on you! I told you he doesn't hurt. I told you so! But you didn't believe me. Foo on you!"

She already liked getting the best of her brother.

22. The Jackdaw

It was already February, but the general was still cooling his heels in the city — still afraid to come home. And Schmidt

was as savage as ever, completely steeped in his torment — it made itself felt in the least little thing.

For example, he went out of his way to make life miserable for his orderly: by teaching him French. And it was Neprotoshnov, no less! Of course, Neprotoshnov even forgot his Russian words when he stood in front of Schmidt, and now this: French. Those lousy Frenchmen had really gummed up the works: they had sent Tikhmen to kingdom come, and then they had drummed this idea into that crazy noggin of Schmidt's.

With his dark mustache and eyes, Neprotoshnov was a fine-looking fellow. But he did have eyes like a fish. He stood in front of Schmidt and trembled:

"I-I can't say, yer honor, I fergot..."

"How many times have I pounded that word into your head? What do you mean 'I forgot,' eh?"

Silence. The only sound: Neprotoshnov's knees knocking.

"W-well?"

"Jub...jubelye, yer honor..."

"Oh... you dumbbell. By tomorrow you'd better know it backwards and forwards. Now, get out!"

Neprotoshnov sat in the kitchen repeating those damn heathen words. Millstones were grinding in his head; he was confused, shaking. Hearing someone's footsteps, he leaped up like a jack-in-the-box and stood there ramrod-stiff. In his fright he hadn't seen that it wasn't Schmidt, but the Madam, Marya Vladimirovna.

"Well, what's wrong, Neprotoshnov? What's wrong, what's wrong?"

And she stroked his close-cropped soldier's head. Neprotoshnov wanted to catch and hold her small hand, but he lacked the courage. So he was left with nothing but the wish.

"Dear Madam...dear Madam! I know how it is — I know exactly how it is... I'm not blind..."

Marusya went back into the dining room, her eyes blazing — she had something to say. But once she looked at Schmidt, she smashed against his steel. She lowered her eyes, submissive. She forgot all her angry words.

Schmidt was just sitting there, without a book. He never read anymore — he couldn't. He sat there with a cigarette, his eyes tormentedly riveted to one spot — a cut-glass pendant on the lamp. And how incredibly difficult it was to look at Marusya.

"Well, it's about Neprotoshnov, I suppose?" Schmidt grinned.

He loomed over Marusya.

"How I..."

And he fell silent. He only squeezed her arms painfully, just above the elbow: tomorrow there would be bruises.

Many bruises were now blooming on Marusya's thin, childish body — from Schmidt's vicious caresses. He was becoming more cruel and violent toward her. And it was always the same thing: weeping, dying a thousand deaths, she writhed in the ring of Schmidt's arms. But he — he drank in the sweetness of her death throes, her tears, his own destruction. There was no earthly way to escape from him and, worst of all: she didn't want to escape. But the other day at the ball, she had said something to Andrei Ivanych — she had blurted out the words: "Kill Schmidt!" And now she knew no peace: what if?

Andrei Ivanych hadn't forgotten Marusya's words; he remembered them every evening. And every evening there was the same vicious circle, closed by Schmidt. If Schmidt weren't tormenting Marusya — if Schmidt hadn't caught him that time at the frozen window — if Schmidt at the ball hadn't...

Most importantly, there wouldn't be this habit to which he had already become so addicted: Guslyaikin wouldn't stand in front of Andrei Ivanych every evening, he wouldn't smirk with that jelly face of his, he wouldn't tell...

("But for God's sake, I didn't used to be such a good-for-nothing.") — Andrei Ivanych would think at night ("I wasn't like that... Is this really me?")

And again: Schmidt, Schmidt, Schmidt... ("Kill. She wasn't joking; her eyes were dark; they didn't joke.")

And right then and there, for no particular reason, Andrei Ivanych decided: today. It must have been the sun, the tiresomely cheerful thaw, the smiling blue water. On such a day nothing is terrible: Andrei Ivanych simply slipped the pistol into his pocket as if it were a wallet; then he simply went to the Schmidts' as if paying a visit and he simply tugged on the Schmidts' bell.

The bolt began to thunder and Neprotoshnov unlocked the gate. Schmidt was standing in the middle of the yard without a coat. For some reason, there was a pistol in his hands.

"Ah, Lt. Polovets, the mu-si-cian! Long time no see..."

Schmidt didn't move, he stood just as he had been standing — heavy, tall.

("Neprotoshnov... It's impossible in front of him.") — the thought flashed through Andrei Ivanych's mind and he turned to Neprotoshnov:

"Is the Madam home?"

Neprotoshnov started squirming — he recoiled from Schmidt's gaze: he would have to answer in French. But the words, of course, had immediately slipped his mind.

"Jub...jubelye," muttered Neprotoshnov.

Schmidt started laughing, it rang out like iron. He shouted:

"Go on, tell the Madam — be sure to say that an unin-

vited guest has come to see her..."

Andrei Ivanych kept his gaze from wavering:

"Why are you staring? You don't like the pistol? Don't worry! For the time being I only want to pick off that jackdaw over there so it won't keep screeching under our window."

Only then did Andrei Ivanych see the jackdaw: it was cowering silently under a wheelbarrow. Its wings dragged on the ground: it couldn't fly, it didn't know how — it was still a baby.

A shot rang out. The jackdaw began to caw desperately, hoarsely; its wing was stained red; it hopped under the shed. Schmidt twisted his mouth into what must have been a smile. Again he took aim: he had to kill, he had to.

With large, quick steps, Andrei Ivanych ran toward the shed. He stood with his face to Schmidt and his back to the jackdaw.

"I...I won't allow any more shooting. For shame! This is a travesty!"

Schmidt's iron-gray eyes narrowed into slits:

"Lt. Polovets, if you don't get out of the way this very second, I'll shoot you. It makes no difference to me."

Torn by joy and misery, Andrei Ivanych's heart started pounding: ("Marusya, look here, look here! After all, it's not for the jackdaw that I...") He didn't move an inch.

There was a flash of light — a shot. Andrei Ivanych bent down. Dumbfounded, he felt himself: safe and sound.

Schmidt maliciously bared his teeth, like a wolf; his lower jaw began to shake.

"S-scum... This time I won't miss!"

Once again he raised the pistol. Andrei Ivanych squinted his eyes:

("Should I run? No, for God's sake, just one short second and it's all...")

For some reason it had completely slipped his mind that in his pocket he too had a pistol. After all, he had come there in order to... He stood quietly and waited.

One second, two, ten: no shot. He opened his eyes. Schmidt's lower jaw was shaking so violently that he threw the pistol to the ground and held his chin as tightly as he could with both hands. Inside Andrei Ivanych, everything began to move; everything shifted.

"I feel sorry for you. I had planned to..."

He pulled the pistol out of his pocket and showed it to Schmidt. Then he walked quickly toward the gate.

23. Good and Steady

It was the crack of dawn that February morning and someone was already knocking on Andrei Ivanych's door. Andrei Ivanych wanted to say, "Who's there?" but instead of saying it, he plunged back into his dream. Marusya had come and was saying: "You see, I no longer..." But she never said the words after "no longer." Even so, Andrei Ivanych almost knew what she meant. He almost understood this "no longer" he almost...

But the knock at the door was becoming louder, more insistent. Clearly, there was nothing to be done. Andrei Ivanych had to emerge from his dream; he had to get up and open the door.

"Neprotoshnov, you? What are you doing here? What's happened?" Neprotoshnov walked up to the bed, bent down close to Andrei Ivanych and, speaking not at all like a soldier, said:

"Yer honor, Madam has ordered me to tell you that our

master, yer honor, is threatening to kill you. Madam has asked, yer honor, that you do nothing of the sort, God help us..."

"And what is it exactly that I'm not supposed to do?"

But Andrei Ivanych couldn't get another blessed word out of him.

"I can't say, yer honor..."

"Well, and how is the Madam, how is Marusya Vladimirovna, how is she?"

"I-I can't say, yer honor..."

("Oh, you damn fool, at least tell me how she is.")

But Andrei Ivanych looked into Neprotoshnov's hopelessly fishy eyes and let him go.

After Neprotoshnov left, Andrei Ivanych continued to lie there, in the darkness. And suddenly he jumped up:

("My God! If she sent him to tell me that, it means she must... My God, can she really... Me?")

Catch up to Neprotoshnov, catch up and give him your last farthing! Andrei Ivanych ran out on the porch — but there was no sign of Neprotoshnov.

And Andrei Ivanych couldn't bring himself to leave the porch. The sky was enormous, the air smelled of pine, and the sea was like the sky. Spring. If only he could stretch out his arms and rush to where...

Andrei Ivanych squinted his eyes and turned his face upward to the warm sun.

("Dying? Well, all right. It's easy enough to die. Harder to kill, though, and hardest of all — to live... But anything...anything, even killing — all she has to do is want it.")

It was that kind of sun — the kind that led him to the most absurd, far-fetched conclusion: that she, Marusya, that she might really... But what if? That's the kind of sun it was.

To see her from early morning, from daybreak... Nothing else — just the smallest of trifles, the slightest contact of

any kind, like that time...snow was falling outside the window... That was happiness. From early morning to late at night, everything would be happiness.

He wasn't dressed or he would have run over there right away...

Even drilling the soldiers was pleasant today. Even Molochko seemed brand-new.

Molochko, you might say, was actually scintillating, and his calfishness seemed important, not the way it had always been before.

"I'd like to have a word with you," he stopped Andrei Ivanych.

"What? Well, make it snappy! Don't beat around the bush!"

"Schmidt has asked me — can you imagine? — to be his second. Here's the letter."

("So that's it, so that's why Marusya...") Andrei Ivanych opened the envelope and began racing through the letter, devouring it. Ah, faster! faster!

"Yesterday...the jackdaw... My dueling shot... Your turn... I will stand still, and if... I will be most pleased; the time has come."

Andrei Ivanych read the end aloud:

"I ask you, what does this mean? '...Only you will have a shot. And if this is inconvenient for you, we'll see.' I ask you, what sort of duel is this? Strange demands! This isn't a duel — the devil knows what this is! Does he think that while he's just standing there, I'll... You're the second; you've got to..."

"I-I know nothing... He just...he sent me — Schmidt... I don't know " Molochko muttered looking timidly at the broad, furrowed Andrei-Ivanych forehead.

"Listen, go right now and tell Captain Schmidt that this kind of duel is unacceptable to me. If he wants satisfaction,

then we will both have to shoot. Or we can forget about duels altogether... The devil knows what this is!"

With his tail between his legs, Molochko trotted over to see Schmidt. Breathlessly, he reported on everything. Schmidt was smoking. He shook off the ashes indifferently:

"Hmmm, he's against it, right? On the other hand, that's what I..."

"But what else does he need? Just imagine: he even shouted at me! And what for — me? On your part it was... it was so noble — to give away your shot, but he..."

("Noble, hell!") — Schmidt grimaced, shuddered, and then said aloud:

"No-ble, ye-yes... Now here's what I want you to do: tomorrow you will tell everyone that Andrei Ivanych called me... a bastard, that I challenged him, and he refused. Do you understand?"

"Good lord, yes I... But why in the world — tomorrow?"

Schmidt stared at Molochko, grinned unpleasantly and said:

"And now goodby."

His face impassive and stony, Schmidt sat there by himself and smoked a cigarette. His pistol lay on the table.

("Wake up Marusya? Tell her? But what? That I love her, that I loved her? And that the more I loved her...")

He went to the bedroom. Racked by her night-long crucifixions, Marusya slept the sleep of the dead. With her tear-stained face, she looked like a small child. But those two wrinkles at the corners of her mouth...

Schmidt's stoniness crumbled; his face twisted in mortal agony. He got down on his knees and was about to throw himself at her feet. No... He winced and threw up his hands:

("She wouldn't believe me. It doesn't matter...she wouldn't believe me now,") — and he walked hurriedly into

the garden.

And there was Neprotoshnov, rummaging in the flower beds: if only he could do something to make the dear Madam smile, and he had noticed how she used to reach for flowers with both hands.

When Neprotoshnov caught sight of Captain Schmidt, he flinched and stood right up. Schmidt stiffened — he wanted to grin, but his face refused to move.

("He's still afraid of me... The fool!")

"Get out of here," was all he said to Neprotoshnov.

Neprotoshnov made tracks, thanking the dear Lord that he had gotten away in one piece.

Schmidt sat down on a large white rock; he propped his left elbow on his knee.

("No, not like that... I've got to lean against a wall... There now... good and steady.")

He took out the pistol. ("Yes, good and steady.") And that vicious spring was released, setting him free.

24. The Wake

Andrei Ivanych sat down to write Marusya a letter. Maybe it was ridiculous, senseless, but nothing else was possible — he had to pour out everything that...

He didn't notice that it had already gotten dark. He didn't realize that Neprotoshnov had entered and was standing in the doorway. God only knows how long he had stood there trying to work up the courage to call out:

"Yer honor... Lieutenant, sir!"

Andrei Ivanych testily threw down his pen: not fish-eyes again!

"Well, what is it? Still the same thing? He wants to kill me?"

"Not at all, yer honor... Captain Schmidt himself... He's gone and killed himself... He's done for..."

Andrei Ivanych jumped toward Neprotoshnov. Grabbing his shoulders, he bent down and looked him straight in the eye. The eyes were human, after all — tears were pouring out.

("So Schmidt's no more. But that means Marusya — now she's...")

In the twinkling of an eye he was there, at the Schmidts'. He dashed through the parlor; lying on the table was something white and long. That wasn't the point, that wasn't...

Marusya was sitting alone in the cheerful timbered dining room. A samovar was going. Neprotoshnov had thought that up all by himself: after all, when something like this happens — how can you get along without a samovar? Marusya's dear, disheveled chestnut head was resting on her arms.

"Marusya!" in this one word Andrei Ivanych poured out everything that was in his letter. He stretched out his arms to her: now everything, all the pain...

Marusya stood up. Her face was wild, furious.

"Away! Away! I can't bear the sight of you!... It was all...it was you — I know everything..."

"Me? What have I done?"

"Come now! Why did you refuse? What would it have cost you to shoot in the air? I even sent... Oh, you wanted, I know...you wanted; I know why you did it. Get away, get away. I can't bear the sight of you!"

Andrei Ivanych flew out as though he'd been scalded. He stopped at the gate. Everything was swimming in his head.

("How can it be? She really...after all this...after all this, she loved him? She forgave him? She loved Schmidt?")

Slowly, tortuously, he descended until he hit bottom — and he shuddered: it was so deep.

("I've got to go back, get down on my knees the way I did then: a great woman...")

But from the house came a wild, inhuman scream. He understood: it was impossible to go back. Utterly and forever impossible.

The general returned from the city to attend Schmidt's funeral. And he delivered such a eulogy that he even shed a tear or two himself. As for the others — what is there to explain?

They were all at the funeral paying their last respects to Schmidt. Only Marusya didn't show up. She left town without waiting for the funeral: how do you like that? She packed her things and left. Yet she supposedly still loved him! You call that love? A fine love!

Thanks to her whirlwind departure, it looked as though Schmidt would have to get along without a wake. But the general, kind-hearted soul that he was, saved the day by having the wake in his own home.

Now that Schmidt was safely out of the way, people couldn't say enough nice things about him. It's true, he had been a bit difficult and bad-tempered. But on the other hand...

Everyone had a good word for Schmidt. The one exception was Andrei Ivanych, who said nothing at all — just sat as if immersed in water. Ekh, his conscience must have bothered him a little. After all, they say that he and Schmidt fought an American duel — true or false? And all because of a woman, all because of a woman... Ekh!

"Come on now, old boy, drink up, drink up, or else you'll..." Nechesa tenderheartedly poured Andrei Ivanych a little more.

And Andrei Ivanych drank; he obediently drank. Heav

enly drunkenness — caressing: there's no place to lay one's head, so drunkenness will take it, fondle it, cheer it up with illusion...

And when the loaded Molochko banged out "The Madam" on his guitar (at the wake, no less) — Andrei Ivanych was suddenly swept away by a surge of drunken, hopeless gaiety — that same dismal gaiety seen nowadays in the antics of Russia, languishing in its own godforsaken hole.

Andrei Ivanych jumped out into the middle of the room, stood there for a second, wiped his broad forehead — and then proceeded to limber up his knees — did he ever!

"That's the way! He's one of us. Well done, Andrei Ivanych," shouted Molochko approvingly. "I told him, drink up, old boy, drink up, I said. He's one of us!"

Evgeny Zamyatin (1884-1937) wrote *A Godforsaken Hole* (*Na kulichkakh*) in Nikolaev, a port on the Black Sea, in the winter of 1913-14. Soon after it appeared in the March 1914 issue of the journal *Zavety,* the censor confiscated this issue. Zamyatin's novella was taken out and a second edition of the journal appeared without it. *A Godforsaken Hole* was condemned for "pornographic" expressions and details; its portrait of Russian officers was found "most insulting to military honor." The work was not reprinted until 1923.